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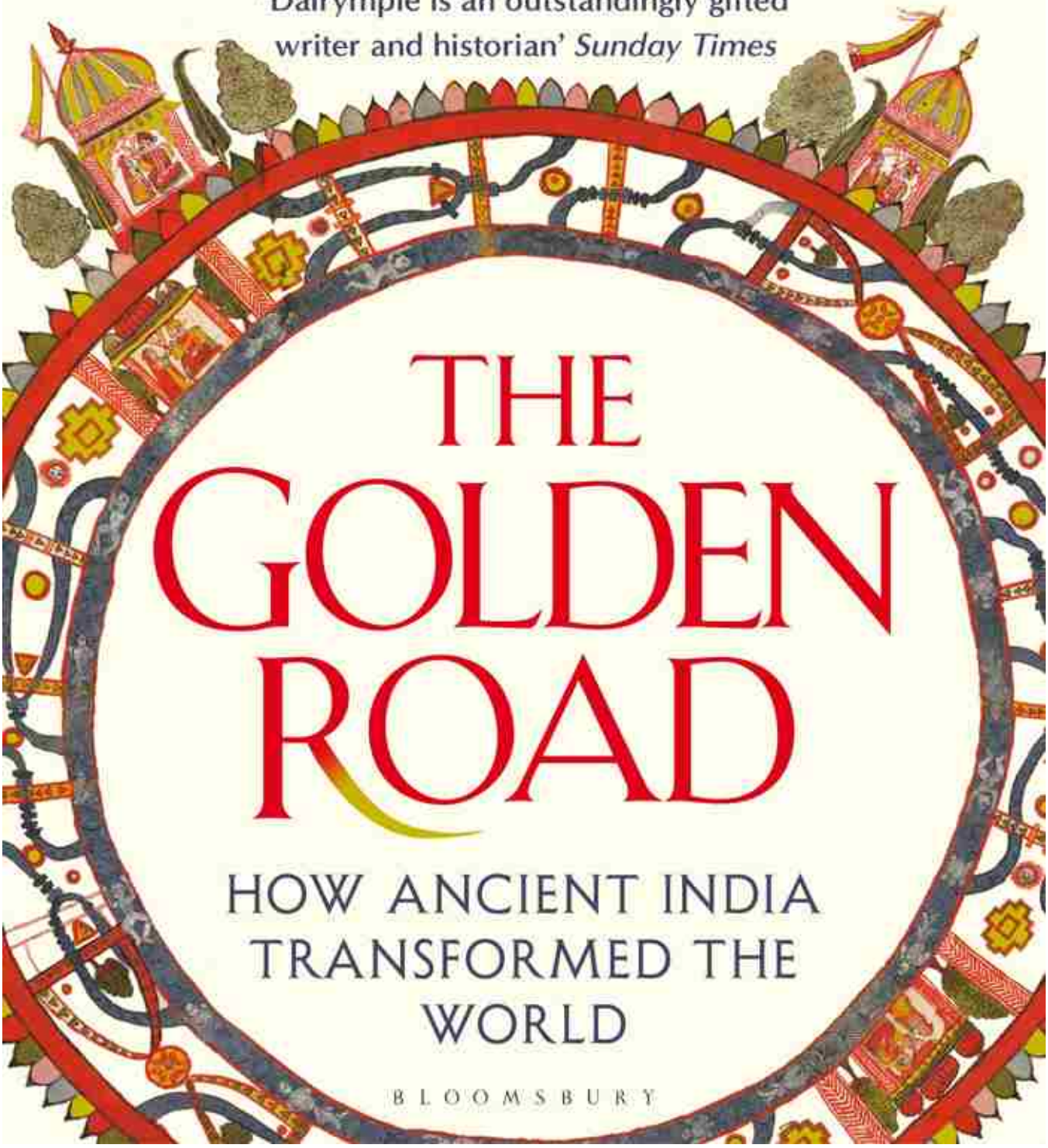

THE GOLDEN ROAD

HOW ANCIENT INDIA TRANSFORMED THE WORLD

BLOOMSBURY

THE GOLDEN ROAD

For Rob & Anna,
and to the memory of my much-missed friend
and beloved colleague, Bruce Wannell

WILLIAM DALRYMPLE

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HOW ANCIENT INDIA TRANSFORMED THE WORLD

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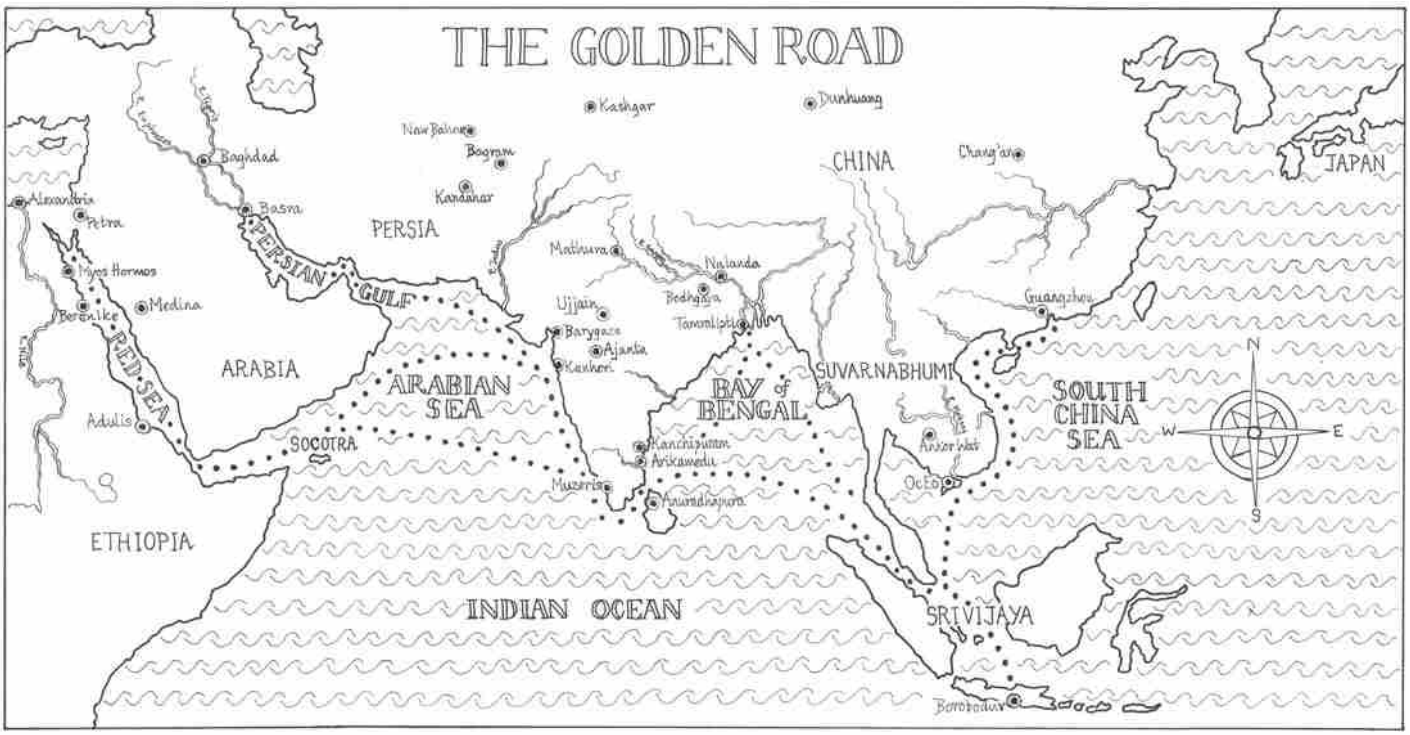
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Anuradhapura
ETHIOPIA
INDIAN OCEAN
SRIVIJAYA
Borobudur

Introduction

The Indosphere

‘People of distant places, with diverse customs,’ wrote a Chinese Buddhist monk in the early seventh century CE, ‘generally designate the land they most admire as India.’[1]

Xuanzang was one of China’s greatest scholars, travellers and translators. When he wrote these words, he had just returned from an epic seventeen-year, 6,000-mile overland pilgrimage to the great Indian centres of learning. The account he wrote of that journey, *The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions*, makes it clear that the world he had just passed through, from Chang’an in western China to Kanchipuram in southern India, and back, was largely dominated by Indic ideas, art, science, languages and religions. In particular, he looked with profound reverence at India’s ancient Buddhist university monasteries, such as Nalanda, with their tens of thousands of learned monks. For Xuanzang they were simply the greatest centres of knowledge and scholarship in the world, the Indian equivalent of the great Library of Alexandria.

Lectures at Nalanda were given in a hundred different halls each day, he wrote, ‘and the students studied diligently without wasting a single moment’.[2] He described the lecture halls, the stupa relic mound, five temples and 300 apartments and dormitories which housed the 10,000 monks and international scholars who gathered there.[3] Between them they studied the texts of the different schools of Buddhism, as well as the sacred Vedas, logic, Sanskrit grammar, philosophy, medicine, metaphysics, divination, mathematics, astronomy, literature and magic. ‘The priests of Nalanda, to the number of several thousands, are men of the highest ability and talent,’ he wrote. ‘Their distinction is very great at the present time. The day is not sufficient for asking and answering profound questions. From morning until night they engage in discussions; the old and the young mutually help each other.’[4]

Above all, he described the glories of Nalanda’s library, which he regarded as the greatest repository of knowledge in the world. It was nine storeys high and contained three divisions: the Ratnadadhi, the ‘Sea of Jewels’, the Ratnasagara, the ‘Ocean of Jewels’, and the Ratnaranjaka, the ‘Jewel-Adorned’. Any manuscript could be borrowed, though Nalanda regulations held that it must be stored in the niche in the monks’ cells next to the square central courtyard.[5] Here it was that Xuanzang studied for five industrious years, copying out by hand the Sanskrit manuscripts he wished to take back home to China. Later, these manuscripts would be translated, and recopied many more times, carried on to monasteries around China, Korea and Japan.

For most of late medieval and modern history, India was on the receiving end of a great deal of cultural influence from beyond its borders. Following the establishment of a series of Islamic sultanates throughout India in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Persian became the language of government across much of India, and Persianate cultural standards, in art, dress and etiquette, became dominant even in southern Hindu courts. Then, in the nineteenth century, during the rise of the East India Company and the Victorian Raj, English gradually replaced Persian, and India became instead part of the Anglosphere. To master English was now the route to advancement, and Indians who wished to get ahead had to abandon, or at least sublimate, much of their own culture, becoming instead English-speaking 'Brown Sahibs', or what V. S. Naipaul called 'Mimic Men'. In time, of course, Indians became masters in both languages, adopting Persian and English as their own, and, just as Bedil Dehlavi became one of the most admired Persian poets in seventeenth-century Central Asia, so many Indian writers from Tagore to Rushdie, as well as Naipaul himself, became literary superstars in English in the twentieth.

But for a millennium and a half before then, from about 250 bce to 1200 CE, India was a confident exporter of its own diverse civilisation, creating around it an empire of ideas which developed into a tangible 'Indosphere' where its cultural influence was predominant. During this period, the rest of Asia was the willing and even eager recipient of a startlingly comprehensive mass transfer of Indian soft power, in religion, art, music, dance, textiles, technology, astronomy, mathematics, medicine, mythology, language and literature.

Sanskrit had been a profoundly sacred tongue for at least a millennium before the Common Era, but at some point between the first century bce and the first century ce, Sanskrit was reinvented as a literary and political language, the start of an astonishing transformation of its use that saw Sanskrit literary culture rapidly spread all the way from Afghanistan to Java. Indeed, in time, as Sheldon Pollock has shown, Sanskrit, 'the Language of the Gods in the World of Men', became the lingua franca across much of Asia and left a permanent mark on the map from Balkh (Sanskrit Bahlika) to Singapore (Sanskrit Simhapura). The name 'Java', for example, derives from the Sanskrit Yavad dvipa, meaning 'the island shaped like a *yava*', or grain of barley. Indeed, so deeply immersed in Sanskritic culture did the elites of South-east Asia become that they began renaming their towns and settlements after the most celebrated places of Indian mythology.[6] To this day, the ancient capital of Thailand is named Ayutthaya after Ayodhya, Lord Rama's capital in the great epic poem the *Ramayana*, while the national airline of Indonesia is Garuda, named after the god Vishnu's mount. The spread of Sanskrit brought all of Indian literature, arts and the sciences in its wake.

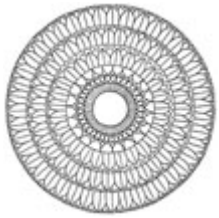
Out of India came not just pioneering merchants, astronomers and astrologers, scientists and mathematicians, doctors and sculptors, but also the holy men, monks and missionaries of several distinct strands of Indic religious thought and devotion – Vedic, Shaiva and Vaishnava Hinduism, or Sanatana Dharma as some prefer to call it, as well as Theravada, Mahayana and Tantric Buddhism.

These different religious worlds sometimes mingled and melded, sometimes competed; occasionally, they clashed. But between them they came to dominate South, Central, South-east and Eastern Asia. Over half the world's population today lives in areas where Indian ideas of religion and culture are, or once were, dominant, and where Indian gods ruled the imaginations and the aspirations of men and women. Meanwhile India's intellectual influence travelled far to the west, giving us not only crucial mathematical concepts such as zero, but also the very form of the numbers we all use to this day. This is arguably the nearest thing the human race has to a universal language.

Indian learning, Indian religious insights and Indian ideas are among the crucial foundations of our world. Like ancient Greece, ancient India came up with a set of profound answers to the big questions about what the world is, how it operates, why we are here and how we should live our lives. What Greece was first to Rome, then to the rest of the Mediterranean and European world, so at this period India was to South-east and Central Asia and even to China, radiating out and diffusing its philosophies, political ideas and architectural forms out over an entire region, not by conquest but instead by sheer cultural allure and sophistication. In matters of science, astronomy and mathematics, India was to be a teacher of the Arab world, and hence Mediterranean Europe too.

This entire spectrum of early Indian influence has always been there, hiding in plain sight: in the Buddhism of Sri Lanka, Tibet, China, Korea and Japan, in the place names of Burma and Thailand, in the murals and sculptures of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* in Laos and Cambodia, in the Hindu gods, rituals and temples of Bali. Yet somehow the Golden Road linking all these diverse forms and geographies

into a single cultural unit, a vast Indosphere stretching all the way from the Red Sea to the Pacific, has never been recognised as the link connecting all these different places and ideas to each other; and up to now has never been given a name.[7]



Thanks to the winds of the Asian monsoon, India lies at the centre of a great network of navigable sea roads and maritime trade routes.

Every summer, the heating of the Tibetan plateau creates an area of low pressure which sucks in moist, cool winds from the Bay of Bengal. Every winter, cold dry winds rake out from the snows of the Himalayas to the warm seas beyond. The Indian peninsula sits in the middle of this vortex of winds which blow one way for six months a year, then reverse themselves for the next six. The regularity and predictability of these winds generate monsoons that have allowed millennia of Indian sailors to raise their sails and propel themselves at speed across the oceans that surround them; then, when the winds reverse, safely back again.[8]

Early Indian traders used the sea roads of monsoon Asia to travel in two directions. Many headed westwards on the winter winds to the east coast of Africa and the rich kingdoms of Ethiopia. Here they had a choice. One northern fork led through the Persian Gulf to Iran and Mesopotamia; the other, to its south, via Aden, took them through the Red Sea to Egypt. Indian traders heading west used to arrive with the trade winds in early summer and ride the summer monsoon home in August; with the winds behind you, the journey from the mouth of the Red Sea to Gujarat could take as little as forty days, though if you missed the winds the round trip might take as long as a year, and cause you to take a prolonged holiday on the Nile.[9] The equivalent overland route by camel caravan through Afghanistan would take at least three times as long.[10]

For 300 years, from the time of the Battle of Actium in 31 bce and the integration of Egypt into the Roman imperial system, the main arteries of early east–west travel lay less overland, through a Persia often at war with Rome, and much more across the Golden Road of the open oceans, via the choppy waters of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.

As Kaludayin, an early Buddhist monk and contemporary of the Buddha, noted, what propelled men over these dangerous waters was simply the lure of gold and the desire for wealth.[11] Through these waters passed boatload after boatload of Indian exports, while in reverse the wealth of Rome drained into Indian pockets. In the first century the puritanical Roman naval commander Pliny the Elder describes India as ‘the sink of the world’s most precious metals … There is no year which does not drain our empire of at least fifty-five million sesterces … So great is the labour employed, and so distant is the region drawn upon, to enable the Roman matron to flaunt see-through clothes in public … Thus is India brought near: by greed, and women’s decadent need to follow fashion.’[12]

According to Pliny’s near contemporary the Greek geographer Strabo, Roman control of Egypt quickly led to a sixfold increase in the shipping heading to India compared to the Ptolemaic period preceding it: ‘when Gallus was prefect of Egypt, I accompanied him and ascended the Nile as far as Syene and the frontiers of Ethiopia,’ he wrote. Here ‘I learned that as many as one hundred and twenty vessels were sailing from Myos Hormos to India, whereas formerly, under the Ptolemies, only a very few ventured to undertake the voyage and to carry on traffic in Indian merchandise.’[13] Some economic historians now estimate that such was the scale of the Red Sea trade at this period that the customs taxes raised by Roman officials on the trade coming through the Red Sea would alone have covered around one-third of the entire revenues that the Roman Empire required to administer its global conquests and maintain its legions, from Scotland to the borders of Persia and from the Sahara to the banks of the Rhine and Danube.[14]

This initial boom lasted for a century, and the trade continued at a slightly reduced rate for another 300 years. But the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the fraying and decay of much of urban life in northern and western Europe in the early fifth century ce was followed by the incessant wars between Byzantium and Persia in the sixth. The Red Sea port of Myos Hormos was already in terminal decline by the

fourth century; its rival, Berenike, was abandoned around 550, possibly finished off by an outbreak of the Justinianic plague.[15]

As supplies of gold from the west to India fell catastrophically in the fourth and fifth centuries ce, a major realignment of Indian overseas trade began to take place. If gold was no longer arriving in massive quantities from Rome, then Indian merchants, often managed and marshalled by a series of newly founded trading guilds, began bringing it instead from the long coastlines and islands of Suvarnabhumi, the 'Lands of Gold'.[16]

In what is now Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Malaysia, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia, new urban centres were springing to life; and Indian traders were sailing there with every eastward monsoon, carrying cargoes of beads, textiles, metal goods and other Indian manufactures which they exchanged for spices, gold, camphor, resin and the other raw materials of the region. By the fifth century a major direct sea route had been established through the Straits of Malacca which easily linked the southern and eastern oceans, so taking Indian traders swiftly to China.[17]

Today, in a world divided by national boundaries, we think of Cambodia as very far from India. But in the ancient and medieval world, the sea did not divide so much as unite, and with the summer monsoon winds working in your favour and blowing you ever further eastwards, they made travel over large distances not just possible but remarkably fast. As the western branch of the Golden Road closed up, the revived eastern branch began to replace it in importance. The monsoon winds brought the two sides of the Bay of Bengal into ever closer contact, drawing them together into a single cultural and geographical unit within the Indosphere.

By the first century ce, the journey by merchant ship from the port city of Tamralipti in Bengal to Sri Lanka took only a fortnight; from there to Sumatra was a journey of three weeks, and the passage on to Guangzhou in China took less than a month. Using the winds of the monsoon it would have been much quicker to have travelled from southern India to Java, the Mekong Delta or the mouth of the Yangtze than it would to travel overland to, say, Ujjain in central India or to Kashmir.

The great Indian epics talk of Suvarnabhumi – the eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal – as an eastern El Dorado where fortunes were there for the picking. The *Ramayana* also mentions Suvarnadvipa, the 'Islands of Gold', and the seven kingdoms of the 'gold and silver islands' beyond Sri Lanka, the Indonesian archipelago, all with fabulous mines groaning with riches. 'There,' says the Monkey King Sugriva, 'precious metals could be drawn from the earth as easily as mud elsewhere.'[18]

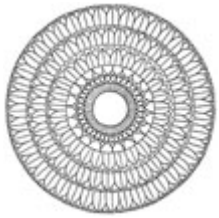
There is growing archaeological evidence that Indian merchants even brought with them skilled artisans to refine on site and to work the gold they bought in Sumatra, Borneo, the Malay peninsula and Thailand. At the early temple site of Krabi in Thailand, archaeologists recently found a goldsmith's touchstone etched with the earliest Tamil inscription in South-east Asia; it is written in the Tamil-Brahmi script of the first to third century ce, and proclaims itself the property of 'Perumpatan' – the 'Great Goldsmith'. Nearby were found gold coins with a bull on the front and a double-masted ship on the reverse.[19] Elsewhere in Thailand, the recent discovery of a third-century bce jewellery mould along with four thin circular gold foils in a distinctly Indian style suggests that Indian jewellers were at work here as early as the Mauryan period, in the third century BCE.[20]

The craftsmen stayed on in Suvarnabhumi because, quite simply, gold was everywhere. This was a world of immense wealth. At excavations on the Mekong delta site of Oc Eo, one of the first major trading cities in South-east Asia, gold jewellery and ornaments were dug up by French archaeologists in dazzling profusion: inlaid gold rings, engraved gold plaques and gold *triratna* 'three jewels' medallions, gold earrings in the shape of a bow, twelve-sided gold beads and gold ornaments in the shape of lotus flowers, even golden snakes. Indeed, in just a few seasons of digging, archaeologists found 1,300 gold objects. Small droplets of gold were found in many trenches, indicating that gold working had actually taken place on the site. As the archaeologists dug down, they felt they had rediscovered the Lands of Gold.[21]

In time, these links would transform the region as South-east Asia became part of the Sanskrit-speaking world, and adopted and adapted for its own use Indic gods, religions and scripts, epics and plays, forms of architecture and ways of thinking about and enumerating the world. Even the place names began to be modelled on originals on the far side of the Bay of Bengal. It was not just that Indian gods had been welcomed into a region: even the landscape itself was being reimagined. The holy rivers of India, the apocalyptic battlefield of the *Mahabharata* and the great palaces of the *Ramayana* were now being imaginatively built anew many thousands of miles to the east of India, in the paddy fields of the Mekong

and amid the volcanoes of Java.

By the sixth or seventh century ce, in other words, South-east Asia had become a central part of the Indosphere.



The Golden Road aims to highlight India's often forgotten position as a crucial economic fulcrum, and civilisational engine, at the heart of the ancient and early medieval worlds and as one of the main motors of global trade and cultural transmission in early world history, fully on a par with and equal to China.

Over the course of more than a thousand years, Indian religions, philosophies and sciences spread out in all directions across the Indosphere, like the shifting rays of a Sanskritic sun that sometimes penetrated surprisingly deeply into far distant recesses of the world around it. The book tells the story of the diffusion of transformative Indian ideas first around Asia, then around the wider world, focusing on three systems of Indian thought that emerged when it was the focal point of a sphere of influence that reached all the way from Afghanistan to Japan, with ripples lapping westwards to the distant shores of the Mediterranean.

The Golden Road first explores the birth of Buddhism in the fifth century bce as a usually non-violent and relatively egalitarian movement that rose as part of a great philosophical churning and transformation, partly in reaction, on one hand, to early Vedic Hinduism, with its strict caste hierarchies and its mass sacrifice of animals, and, on the other, to the harsh austerities of the ascetic Jains. It will follow Buddhism's sudden leap to prominence under the Emperor Ashoka, who helped consolidate Buddhism as a pan-Indian religion and who sent missionaries around the world to spread the *dharma* – the path of duty and morality. It will then tell the history of the spread of Buddhism into Tibet and China, transforming culture, life and thought, a process which culminated in it becoming the court religion through the influence of the remarkable Wu Zetian, the first and only female Emperor of China. Today, despite all the trials of its recent history, China still has the largest numbers of practising Buddhists in the world.

From the Chinese court, Buddhism quickly spread further east, becoming the major religion in Korea and bringing with it a spectrum of Indian ideas ranging from martial arts to Zen meditation. These new Zen (Sanskrit Dhyana) Buddhist teachings would flourish there, before spreading still further east in the late sixth century ce to Asuka-era (593–710) Japan. Here they would in time form the philosophical base for cultural expressions as diverse as the haiku, delicate ink washes of Japanese landscapes and even Samurai swordplay.[22]

The next chapters tell the story of how, at roughly the same time, the ruling elite of South-east Asia overwhelmingly converted to the worship of Hindu gods, while Buddhism became increasingly popular, first with the merchant class, then with the ordinary people, so much so that Theravada Buddhism remains the dominant religion today in much of the region. Across South-east Asia, which had until then been speaking a variety of Chinese, Thai and Tibeto-Burman languages, the elite adopted a very different Indo-European language, Sanskrit, as its courtly lingua franca.

The influence of Indic gods and Indic religions, and the whole scholarly, cultural and linguistic apparatus that came with them, eventually stretched over the greater part of Asia, from Afghanistan in the west to Japan in the east, from Sumatra in the south to Siberia in the north. Indic religions have now dominated Asia's religious, theological, philosophical, cultural, economic and political discourse for almost 2,000 years.

This process culminated in the building of the greatest and most philosophically complex Buddhist structure in the world at Borobudur in Java, and the largest of all Hindu temples, not in India but at Angkor Wat in Cambodia. At Angkor, the temple covers over 500 acres. Beyond extended the palace, pleasure lakes and the quarters of the Khmer capital city, a complex so vast they can be seen from space. Angkor is not just the largest of all Indic temples, but the most spectacular religious structure in the world: the area within the moat is, on its own, four times the size of the Vatican City.

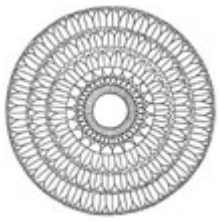
By the twelfth century, the Khmer Empire was at its height and stretched across the region, controlling, with varying degrees of authority, modern Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand and Laos. At this moment of

climax, it arguably had the widest geographical reach of any Hindu empire, embracing as it did almost all of mainland South-east Asia at a time when South Asia was fractured into a mosaic of competing states and polities. At that point it also dwarfed its only Christian rival, that of the Byzantines.

The Khmers were consummate hydraulic engineers. For hundreds of miles around Angkor, a dense network of villages was set amid a patchwork of fields, canals and reservoirs that controlled the monsoon floodwaters to enable wet-rice agriculture. This in turn sustained a population that well exceeded a million people. The great temple complex at the heart of Angkor represented a quantum increase in scale from anything in South Asia and contained many radical stylistic innovations; but it was still firmly based on architectural forms, religious ideas and mythologies that first took shape in India.

This is all the more surprising when one considers the geography of Cambodia, lying as it does so near to China, with a large resident Chinese population and frequent visits by Chinese junks sailing up the waterways of the Mekong. Yet the Khmer kings traced their ancestry not to Confucius, or any mythical Chinese forebear, but to an Indian named Kaundinya. Nor were Chinese philosophical and religious systems such as Daoism and Confucianism ever successfully exported to Cambodia. Instead it was Hindu and Buddhist gods that were introduced. Buddhism remains the dominant religion in Cambodia and across South-east Asia today.[23]

But perhaps it is in scientific rather than spiritual ideas that India stood out most dramatically. Only the ancient Hellenic world equalled it as a powerhouse of new concepts in mathematics and astronomy. By the time of the great fifth-century mathematician Aryabhata (476–550 ce), Indian astronomers had correctly proposed a spherical earth that rotated on its own axis, while using the decimal system and calculating the length of the solar year to an accuracy of seven decimal points. ‘I dived deep in the ocean of astronomical theories, true and false,’ wrote Aryabhata, ‘and rescued the precious sunken jewel of true knowledge by the means of the boat of my own intellect.’[24]



The final chapters of the book will tell the story of how Indian mathematics, such as the number symbols we still use, the decimal system, algebra, trigonometry and the algorithm as well as astronomical discoveries, first passed from India to Abbasid Baghdad in the late eighth century. There the Abbasid viziers were a family of Sanskrit-literate hereditary Buddhist abbots from Afghanistan who had converted to Islam: the Barmakids.

The father of the first Barmakid vizier of Baghdad, Khalid ibn Barmak, had studied Indian mathematics in Kashmir, then one of the great centres of Indian learning. In Baghdad, the knowledge of ancient India was cross-fertilised with that of ancient Greece. It was his son who sent envoys to India to learn Indian medicine and to the great Indian observatory at Ujjain to study Indian mathematics and astronomy. Both expeditions brought Indian scholars back to Baghdad, where they began the process of translating the Sanskrit scientific classics into Arabic. This established in the heart of the young Muslim world not just Indian methods of healing and looking at the stars, but a revolutionary Indian concept that would transform mathematics: zero.

From Baghdad, these ideas spread across the Islamic world. Five hundred years later, in 1205, Leonardo of Pisa, known by his nickname ‘Fibonacci’, returned from Algeria to Italy with his father. Fibonacci had grown up in a Pisan trading post in Bejaïa, where he had learned fluent Arabic as well as Arab mathematics. Aged thirty-two, he wrote the *Liber Abaci*, the ‘Book of Calculation’. It was he who first popularised in Europe the use of what were later thought of as ‘Arabic numerals’, so seeding the commercial revolution that financed the Renaissance and in time, as these ideas spread north, the economic rise of Europe.

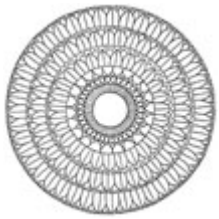
But these numbers were not Arabic in origin. As Fibonacci and his Arab masters recognised, they were Indian. ‘When my father held the post of notary at the customs house at Bejaïa, he arranged for me to come to him when I was a boy,’ wrote Fibonacci in the introduction to his *Liber Abaci*.

Because he thought it useful for me, he wanted me to spend a few days there in the mathematical

school, and to be taught there.

> Here I was introduced to a wonderful kind of teaching that used the nine figures of the Indias. With the sign 0, which the Arabs call zephyr (*al-sifr*), any number whatsoever can be written. Getting to know this pleased me far beyond all else … Therefore concentrating on this method, I made an effort to compose this book, so that those seeking knowledge of this can be instructed by such a perfect method and so that in future the Latin race may not be found lacking this knowledge.[25]

The roots of these 'nine figures of the Indias' were first written down in the Brahmi script in third-century bce Bihar, at the time of the Emperor Ashoka. This is something Europeans mostly erased from their memory in recent centuries. It is something they need to retrieve from oblivion today.



If India's transformative effect on the religions and civilisations around it was so central to world history, why is the extraordinary diffusion of its influence not better and more widely known? Some might argue that this is a legacy of colonialism, and more specifically Victorian Indology, which undermined, misrepresented and devalued Indian history, culture, science and knowledge from the period of Macaulay onwards. If India were acknowledged to already have been a powerful, cosmopolitan and profoundly sophisticated civilisation, then what justification would there be for Victorian Britain's civilising mission? How would you set out to bring civilisation to a part of the world that you recognised has been supremely civilised for thousands of years and which indeed was spreading its influence all over Asia long before the coming of Christianity?

Partly, also perhaps, it is because of a tendency today to study this story as separate disciplines, each focusing on different regions and each the preserve of different groups of scholars with different regional specialisations who go to different conferences, and whose objects are then curated in different museum departments.

The many Buddhist monuments and artworks scattered around Afghanistan and China's Taklamakan desert are usually viewed as the first step in the story of the spread of Buddhism through Asia. Conversely, the spread of Indian and especially Hindu culture, literature and religion south-eastwards to Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, Indonesia and the Malay Peninsula tends to be studied as part of the story of the Sanskritisation of Indo-China.

Finally, the extraordinary and little-known story of how Indian mathematics gave the world the numerals we all use today, tends to be studied in Arabic or possibly History of Science departments of universities, as it was through Abbasid Baghdad that Indian ideas of mathematics began their journey westwards. Yet to recount the diffusion of Indian influence during this period as three quite separate processes obscures a more extraordinary story still, and tends to diminish India's role as a major civilisational centre.

There is in addition another reason why the remarkable and catalytic diffusion of early Indian civilisation around Asia is not better known. It lies in the pendulum swings of scholarly fashion. The 1930s and 1940s generation of colonial French historians imagined India's role in ancient South-east Asia as a civilising colonial mission, rather like that of the French themselves at the time they were writing.

'Mother of Wisdom,' wrote the archaeologist and epigrapher Sylvain Lévi, 'India gave her mythology to her neighbours who went to teach it to the whole world. Mother of law and philosophy, she gave to three-quarters of Asia a god, a religion, a doctrine, an art. She carried her sacred language, her literature, her institutions into Indonesia, to the limits of the known world.' He added, 'She has the right to reclaim, in universal history, the rank that ignorance has refused her for a long time and to hold her place amongst the great nations, summarising and symbolising the spirit of humanity.' Lévi's colleague, George Coedès, wrote in a similar vein that 'the expansion of Indian civilisation to the East … is one of the outstanding events in the history of the world, one that has determined the destiny of a good portion of mankind'. The great Hindu and Buddhist monuments of South-east Asia may have looked a little different from their counterparts in India, but they were, nonetheless, the 'pure productions of the Indian genius, the deep

meaning of which is apparent only to the eyes of the Indianist.'[26]

The ideas of Lévi and Coedès were eagerly picked up by a generation of Indian intellectuals, many of whom were Bengali and some of whom had attended the University of Paris. In 1926 these nationalist historians founded what they called 'the Greater India Society for the study of Indian culture in East, South-east and Central Asia'. Rabindranath Tagore, the great Nobel Prize-winning poet, was invited to be the *purodha* or 'spiritual guide' of the Society, and they set up their own journal, which continued to publish as late as 1958.[27]

Many of the contributing members were the finest Indian historians of the day, but – amplifying the preconceptions of their French colonial teachers – their work framed Indian influence in terms of 'Ancient Hindu Colonies in the Far East', as R. C. Majumdar entitled a book that he published in 1944, at the height of the Indian Freedom Struggle, with its talk of 'an inferior civilisation' being overwhelmed and colonised by 'a superior one'.[28] Majumdar wrote that Hindu princes had conquered, settled and ruled South-east Asia, which, in Majumdar's telling of it, delighted the locals who 'from this time forward … cheerfully submitted to their foreign masters and adopted their manners, customs, languages and religion. They were politically merged in the Indian elements and there was complete cultural fusion between the two races.'[29] This was, of course, long before the emergence of the idea of 'soft power'.[30] In the first Bulletin issued by the Society, Dr Kailas Nag went even further, talking of 'India's noble dynamic of cultural imperialism' which 'soon won for India the ineliable empire over the vast continent, right across Tibet and China to Corea and Japan on the one hand and across Burma and Indo-China to Java and Indonesia on the other.'[31]

There was also a slight tendency among some of these scholars to attribute to India at some point or another nearly all the world's great scientific and mathematical advances, something which was passed on to the laymen of the wider Indian diaspora, and which led to the exaggerations of Sanjeev Bhaskar's celebrated *Goodness Gracious Me* sketch: Christianity? Indian! Leonardo da Vinci? Indian! Royal family? Indian!

In the post-war period, at the height of decolonisation, an historiographical backlash set in. Post-colonial historians from the new nations of South-east Asia, newly freed from the colonial yoke, began to push back against the idea that the formative moments in their history had been the result of any sort of ancient Indian colonialism. These historians strongly objected to the idea that their ancestors were savages, brought to civilisation by sword-wielding Indian adventurers and zealous missionaries of the Brahmin priestly caste. Nor were they thrilled to learn that their homelands were just an extension of 'Greater India'.

They pointed out, rightly, that there was no evidence to show any large-scale Indian military activity in South-east Asia before a series of Chola raids of the eleventh century. Ideas that there were early 'Hindu Colonies' were, they argued, illusory, projecting the evidence of cultural and economic influence much further than was warranted into the political and military sphere. They were also able to show that administratively, South-east Asia was never a part of India before the Chola era, something implied by many nationalistic enthusiasts for Akhand Bharat, or 'Greater India'.

Over the next seventy years, scholars in the region went out of their way to fight off not just the notion of 'Hindu Colonies' but also the whole concept of 'Indianisation' in general, which became almost a dirty word in South-east Asian university departments, to be used only when heavily hedged with inverted commas and qualifying adjectives.

A younger generation of post-colonial archaeologists and art historians working in Vietnam and Cambodia were quick to minimise notions of Indian colonialism, and instead presented their Indic-influenced finds as part of a reciprocal relationship of 'acculturation' and cultural 'convergence' and exchange between India and South-east Asia.[32] Many western historians working in the region echoed and amplified these reservations. Meanwhile the Marxist orientation of many Indian historians until recently led to a lack of interest in matters of religion and art, which meant there was little or no pushback from Indian academia.

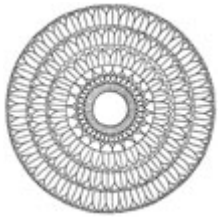
This new generation of archaeologists argued that South-east Asian elites selectively and creatively used and transformed what Indians had brought to the region, constantly adapting rather than slavishly adopting Indian ideas. The sculptures at Angkor Wat, for example, may have been Hindu but they were clearly carved in a completely distinct Khmer style. Moreover, monuments erected in Java and Cambodia were vastly larger than anything in medieval India.

There were also many cases where Hindu or Buddhist ideas from South-east Asia found their way back to India, enhanced and transformed by the work of theologians and artists of Maritime South-east Asia. This

loop can be compared to ‘the pizza effect … a Neapolitan dish which flourished and evolved in the US, was further exported around the world, then re-imported back into Italy’.[33] A contemporary parallel to this would be yoga, an Indian practice that flourished globally once it was introduced to the west. New inventions such as ‘hot yoga’ or ‘goat yoga’ have been created for which there are no Indian counterparts. Indeed today most of modern ‘yoga’ is nothing but a fitness regime of physical exercise quite divorced from its Indic religious and philosophical context and with only the most tenuous links to its ancient Indian practice.[34] There are historical precedents for this in the way, for example, that Mahayana Buddhism developed its own forms of devotion which proved hugely popular in China and Tibet, but never became dominant in its homeland.

Yet there is still no denying that the cultural flow was overwhelmingly one way: while India did in time take in some Chinese inventions, such as paper and gunpowder, there are no inscriptions in Khmer in Tamil Nadu, no Indonesian architectural forms in Bengal, no cult of Malay gods in Gujarat. The only inscriptions surviving from South-east Asians in India are in Sanskrit, and record grants to Nalanda partly in order to accommodate expatriate scholars at the monastery university. Equally, it was Indian religions, Indian languages and Indian artistic and architectural forms that were in use from Angkor to Ayutthaya, however much they were subtly changed and transformed in transit.

This was in stark contrast to a much smaller ‘Sinosphere’, effectively limited to Korea, northern Vietnam and Japan, partly because the difficulties presented by the Chinese script, which limited access to Chinese language, literature and civilisation beyond China itself.



The centrality of the Indian subcontinent as one of the two ancient economic and cultural hubs of Asia, and of its ports as the principal places of maritime east–west exchange, has also been partially obscured by the seductively Sinocentric concept of the ‘Silk Road’, an overland trade route said to stretch ever since antiquity all the way across Asia from China to Turkey and the eastern shores of the Mediterranean.

Despite its modern popularity the idea of a Silk Road was completely unknown in ancient or medieval times: not a single ancient record, either Chinese or western, refers to its existence. Instead, it was invented as late as 1877 by a Prussian geographer, Baron von Richthofen, who, while engaged in a geological survey of China, was charged with dreaming up a route for a railway linking Berlin with Beijing with a view to establishing German colonies and infrastructure projects in the region.[35] This route he named *die Seidenstraßen*, ‘the Silk Roads’ – the first use of the term.[36]

It was not until 1938 that the term Silk Road appeared in English, as the title of a popular book by a Swedish explorer, Sven Hedin. Since then, the term has captured the global imagination and the ‘reopening’ of the Silk Road has been announced by President Xi Jinping of China as part of his Belt and Road Initiative. In this way, the idea has been effectively co-opted and actively mobilised as part of Chinese foreign policy, partly to obfuscate its economic and military projections of power. It has now been elevated to unquestioned fact.[37]

Following Richthofen, maps of the overland Silk Route linking east and west, the Mediterranean with the South China Sea, often feature a single small arrow pointing south from Kashgar down towards the Himalayas. That arrow is labelled: ‘To India’. The real economic action, the map implies, took place between China and western Europe; India was an almost passive observer of, and a lucky recipient of largesse from, the main highway of intercontinental commerce running far to its north.

The reality is very different. Although overland trade routes through Iran were clearly of central importance when Mongol rule stretched from the Mediterranean to the South China Sea during the thirteenth century, this was not the case during the classical and early medieval era. Indeed the Roman Empire and China actually had only the haziest notions of each other’s existence – vaguely aware of each other, but almost never in direct contact.

The earliest reference in Chinese sources to an attempt to send an embassy to ‘Da Qin’ – usually identified as Rome – is as late as 97 ce. It failed to reach its destination.[38] As one Roman guide to the commerce of the

Indian Ocean put it, ‘Beyond this region at the northernmost point, where the sea ends somewhere on the outer fringe, there is a very great inland city called Thina [China] from which silk floss, yarn and cloth are shipped by land via Bactria [Afghanistan] to Barygaza [in modern Gujarat] and via the Ganges River back to Limyrike [Kerala]. It is not easy to get to this Thina.’[39]

In reality, goods from China largely reached Rome merely as an exotic supplement to its thriving commerce with India, and passed through Indian ports.[40] For, from the time of Augustus (r. 31 bce–14 ce), for several centuries, Rome and ancient India were major trading partners, with hundreds of huge cargo ships passing directly between the two each year. Roman trading manuals reveal a real, practical familiarity, even intimacy, with the ports of India, especially those on the west coast, with detailed descriptions that clearly derive from first-hand experience and direct observation. If China and Rome ever came face to face, they did so here in the quays, ports and bazaars of coastal India.

In contrast, the Silk Route barely existed in antiquity, at least as Richthofen had imagined it. For while goods certainly passed backwards and forwards as part of local or regional trade, with some objects eventually moving long distances, there was never, at any point in history, any one east–west overland trade route linking the China Sea with the Mediterranean. Nor was there any free movement of goods between China and the west at any point before the Mongol period in the thirteenth century. Marco Polo, the man now most closely associated with the so-called Silk Road, never once mentions the term, even though it was during his lifetime that travel became easiest through the borderless enormity of the vast Mongol Empire.[41]

Even silk, the most celebrated Chinese export, arrived in Roman lands only indirectly, usually by boat, via India, where much of the silk that reached the west was actually manufactured.[42] As late as the age of Augustus most Roman writers mention only the coarse silk produced on the island of Cos. Both Vergil and Seneca writing in the first half of the first century ce confidently assert that silk grew on trees.[43] This would seem to indicate that the importance of silk to the classical west has been exaggerated.

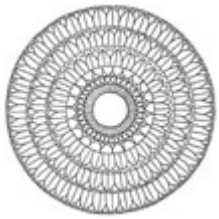
Silk was never the main commodity imported to the west from the east. Instead, it was always far exceeded in value by imports of Indian pepper, spices, ivory, cotton, gems, teak and sandalwood. When in 408 ce Alaric the Visigoth held Rome to ransom, his terms were significant: in addition to 5,000 pounds of gold, he demanded not silk but 3,000 pounds of Indian black pepper.[44]

This is partly why only a handful of Roman coins have ever turned up in China – just a few scattered finds and a single hoard, of uncertain date, containing sixteen coins representing different emperors from Tiberius to Aurelian.[45] On the other hand, Roman coins are found today by archaeologists in India in their tens of thousands, as they have been since the eighteenth century, when East India Company factors in Madras first began reporting the discovery of ‘five cooly-loads’ of Roman gold coins, as well as ‘some thousands’ of silver coins.[46] This is especially so in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, where hoards are still being found every year, mostly dating from the heyday of the Red Sea trade route during the first century.[47] The museums of India probably contain more Roman coins than those of any other country outside the boundaries of the Roman empire.[48] This gold was the economic engine of early Indic cultural power.

Later, when the Roman trade collapsed as a result of a Persian blockade and the loss of the Red Sea to the Arabs, Indian merchants found a new source of gold from South-east Asia. It was only in the thirteenth century when the catastrophe of the Mongol invasions wrecked the old trade routes that the Golden Road finally began to break down. Moreover, India was cut off by a hostile border from the overland trade routes that now stretched, under a single dominion, from the China Sea to the Mediterranean.

Now, superseding trade routes focused primarily on the maritime trade of India, with its annual monsoon winds taking merchandise backwards and forwards at speed, a new trade network was born. This brought goods through the deserts and oases of Central Asia. In 1271, thanks to the Pax Mongolica, Marco Polo and his uncles would be able, more or less for the first time, to travel under a single passport from Jerusalem to Xanadu, so helping to open up a new direct, barrier-free and overland transcontinental trade route.

This was the network of trade routes that would later be called the Silk Roads.



In contrast to India, China has become very good at telling the story that it was always the centre of the Asian world.

The highly nationalistic and Sinocentric reframing and rebranding of history portrayed the trading world of the Silk Roads in idealised terms as a network of peaceful global exchange centred on China, which was depicted as the principal economic engine powering world trade.[49] Since Xi Jinping launched his idea of the Belt and Road, with a promised investment pot of $1 trillion in infrastructure loans, this narrative has become highly politicised and there is much talk of the Belt and Road as a 'New Silk Road'.[50] India has done little to counter this, though there have been some half-hearted attempts to portray its trade relations with the Middle East in terms of a 'Cotton Road', or, more recently, an 'India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor', known as IMEC.[51]

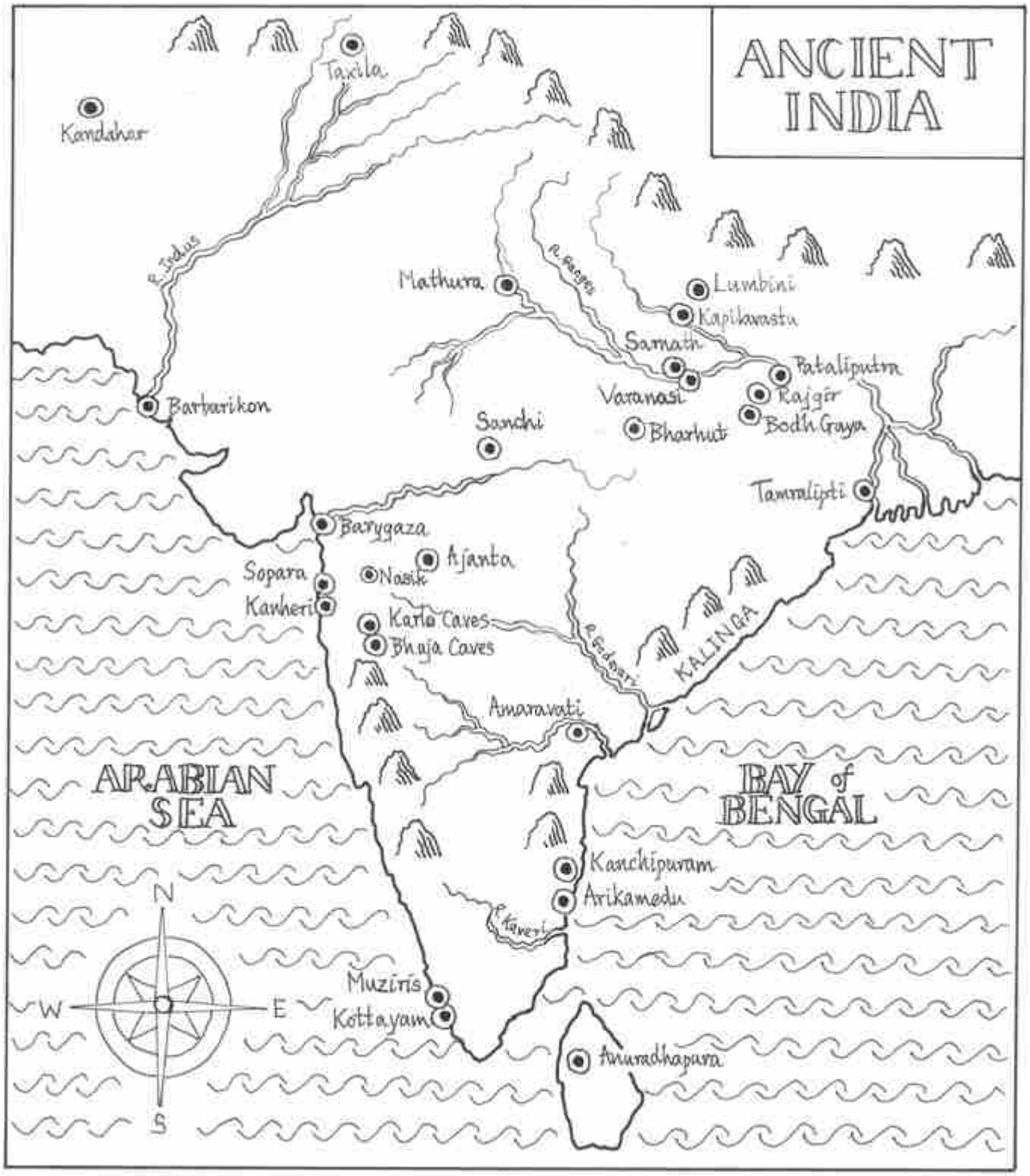
But history tells a quite different story. In the crucial period between the end of antiquity and the onset of the high Middle Ages, you can make at least as good a case for India being the cultural and intellectual centre of Asia, influencing and changing the course of religious, artistic and cultural life in all the regions around it, not least in China itself. This after all was why Xuanzang, and many others like him, risked their lives to make the dangerous journey to what was then the Harvard or MIT of ancient Asia: the great Buddhist university of Nalanda.

Unlike China, India was rarely even partially united in ancient times – when Xuanzang reached what he regarded as the geographical borders of India at Jallalabad in the seventh century ce, he remarked that he was entering a holy land, 'the Five Indias', made up of 'more than seventy' distinct kingdoms.[52, 53] But, for all its political fragmentation, the idea of India as a single cultural, sacral and geographical unit was still clearly understood from the very earliest times.

Xuanzang was not alone in having a clear understanding of the geographical boundaries of the fractured land he called India: his fifth-century ce predecessor, the Chinese monk Faxian, had similar ideas of a country 'triangular in shape, broad in the north and narrow in the south'.[54] Before that, the historian Strabo tells how Alexander the Great talked to sadhus who conceived of their homeland as stretching 'from the mouth of the Indus in the west to the mouth of the Ganges in the east, from the mouth of the Ganges to the tip of southern India, and from there, again, to the mouth of the Indus'.[55] The *Mahabharata*, which was in the process of composition at around the same time, gives an even more concise definition: 'the land north of the seas and south of the Himalayas is called Bharata, where the descendants of King Bharata lived'.[56]

This India, or Bharat, however defined, was one of the two great intellectual and philosophical superpowers of ancient Asia, fully the equal to China in the broader ancient world. It set the template for the way much of the world would think and express itself, and would significantly alter the trajectory of the history of a great swathe of mankind. For more than a thousand years it was a garden that issued the seeds that, once planted elsewhere, flowered in new, rich and unexpected ways.

Exactly how it did so is the subject of this book.


ANCIENT INDIA
Taxila
Kandahar
R. Indus
Mathura
R. Ganges
Lumbini
Kapilavastu
Sarnath
Varanasi
Pataliputra
Rajgir
Bodh Gaya
Barbarikon
Sanchi
Bharhut
Tamralipti
Barygaza
Ajanta
Sopara
Nasik
Kanheri
Karla Caves
Bhaja Caves
R. Godavari
KALINGA
Amaravati
ARABIAN SEA
BAY of BENGAL
Kanchipuram
Arikamedu
R. Kaveri
Muziris
Kottayam
Anuradhapura
N
W
E
S

A Gale of Stillness

1

In the early summer of 1819, a British hunting party was heading through thick jungle near Aurangabad in the Deccan when the tiger they were tracking disappeared into a deep ravine.

Leading the party was Captain John Smith, a young cavalry officer from Madras. Beckoning his friends to follow, he tracked the pugmarks down a semi-circular scarp of steep basalt and hopped across the rocky bed of the Waghur river. He then made his way slowly up through the bushes at the far side of the steep horseshoe-shaped amphitheatre of cliffs. Halfway up, Smith stopped dead in his tracks.[1]

The pug prints led straight past an opening in the rock face. But the cavity was clearly not a natural cave or a river-cut grotto. Instead, despite the long grass, the all-encroaching creepers, pepper vines and thick, thorny undergrowth, Smith could see that he was looking at a man-made façade cut straight into the rock face. The jagged slope had been painstakingly etched away into a perfect portico. It was clearly a work of great sophistication. It was equally clear that it had been abandoned for centuries.

A few minutes later, the party made their way gingerly inside, as Smith held aloft a makeshift torch of burning dried grass and his companions clutched their muskets. A long hall, a hundred feet long by forty feet wide, led right into the living rock, flanked on either side by thirty-nine octagonal pillars. At the apse-shaped end rose the circular dome of a Buddhist stupa carved, like everything else, out of the solid rock of the mountain.

Through the gloom, the officers could see the shadowy outlines of ancient murals. On the pillars were figures of orange-robed monks with white haloes standing on blue lotuses, while on the rock walls were painted panels filled with elaborate crowd scenes, rather as if a painted scroll had been rolled out along the wall of the apse. In the light of the flickering flame, the officers could dimly make out what they later described as ‘figures with curled wigs’. Crunching over a human skeleton and other debris dragged into the cave by generations of predators and scavengers, the party advanced step by step until they reached a pillar at the far end of the hall, next to the stupa. There Smith got out his hunting knife and inscribed over the body of a heavenly being the words: ‘john smith, 28th cavalry, 28 april 1819’.[2]

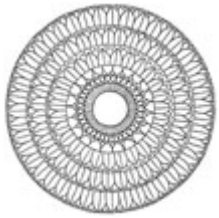
In the decades to come, first other hunting parties, then later groups of archaeologists and Indologists,

followed in Smith's footsteps through the jungle of the Western Ghats to Ajanta as word spread that in this most remote spot lay thirty caves which collectively amounted to one of the great wonders of the ancient world. Two of the caves – Cave 9 and Cave 10 – were soon recognised as some of the oldest completely intact man-made rooms in Asia: from palaeographic evidence, scholars believe they were dug out between 90 and 70 bce, and so completed several generations before Augustus started rebuilding Rome.

On the walls of the caves of Ajanta were found some of the most beautiful and ancient paintings in Buddhist art. Most of these dated from the fifth century ce, an otherwise lost Golden Age of Indian painting. Along with the frescoes of Pompeii and Herculaneum, the delicate murals of Livia's Garden House outside Rome and of Nero's Golden House within the city's walls, Ajanta's walls represented perhaps the most comprehensive depiction of courtly life to survive from classical antiquity anywhere in the world.[3]

The Ajanta murals relayed Buddhist stories in images of supreme elegance and grace. Unlike the flatter art of later Indian miniature painting, here the artists used perspective and foreshortening to produce paintings of courtly life and ascetic renunciation, hunts, battles and erotic liaisons that rank as some of the greatest masterpieces of art produced by mankind in any century. Most beautiful of all are the two astonishing images which probably depict the compassionate Bodhisattvas, Avalokitesvara and Vajrapani, beings on the threshold of Enlightenment who consciously chose to delay crossing over in order to help others who are struggling on the same path. These beings of otherworldly beauty, elegance and compassion are shown with their eyes half closed, inward-looking, weightlessly swaying on the threshold of Enlightenment, caught in what the great historian of Indian art, Stella Kramrisch, described, wonderfully, as 'a gale of stillness'.[4]

Even today, the colours of these murals glow with a brilliant intensity: lizard-green, topaz-yellow, lotus-blue.



In 2014, restoration work in Ajanta Cave 10 uncovered extraordinary new fragments of very early Buddhist murals, dating from the late first century bce – a full 500 years earlier than the celebrated murals of Cave 1. Cave 10 is now known to contain a supreme treasure not previously properly identified or studied: the oldest surviving murals telling the Jataka stories of the different lives of the Buddha.[5]

One particularly well-preserved scene shows a group of kings and deities venerating a Bodhi tree and a stupa. This is an image of the Buddha's first sermon at Sarnath, with the tree taking the place of the Saviour: at this stage in Buddhist art it was considered unacceptable to depict the actual person of the Buddha, so his followers showed him represented at one remove through symbols such as a turban or an empty throne. It was through these narratives that they introduced non-Buddhists to the complex cosmologies and rich mythology of the new faith.

This earliest surviving mural illustrated the life and teachings of a young prince named Siddhartha Gautama, the son of a king who ruled the small kingdom of Kapilavastu on the borderlands of India and Nepal in the mid-fifth century bce.[6] At the age of twenty-nine, Siddhartha renounced his kingdom and became a *sramana*, 'one who strives', a spiritual reformer whose life's work was to seek a solution to the age-old problem of human suffering. In his lifetime he was given the title 'Shakyamuni', the Sage of the Shakya clan. Today, we know him as the Buddha.

The Buddha's teachings had long been lost in most of India by the time Ajanta was rediscovered. Even the fact that he was of Indian origin had been forgotten across most of his homeland. Yet Siddhartha was very much the product of the religious and philosophical world of the fifth century bce, born at a time of rapid change, social disorientation, spiritual crisis and churning across Eurasia that produced not only the new religious thought of the Buddha and Mahavira in India but also the works of Confucius in China and Sophocles in Greece. New technologies, especially the iron plough and improved weaponry, had led to a dramatic shift in the way people lived, transforming many societies from a wandering life of nomadic pastoralism to settled farming, and with it the rise of cities, trade and a highly stratified social structure.[7]

The fire sacrifices that had been the staple of the early Hinduism of the Vedas, composed a thousand

years or more before the birth of the Buddha, were designed for a nomadic and tribal society; but in the flux of change as India urbanised these had begun to give way to increasingly elaborate and expensive ceremonies, sometimes involving the mass slaughter of large numbers of animals. Many seem to have yearned for a move away from blood sacrifices and towards religious practice more focused on good conduct and ethics. At the same time, the solidifying of the caste system and growing ideas of ritual purity had led to great social discontent. In response, many new belief systems emerged: some historians estimate that as many as sixty-six new heterodox creeds appear around this time, and there is no evidence that, in the region occupied by the historical Buddha, Brahminical Hinduism had successfully imposed itself as the dominant religious culture.[8] Instead, the world of the Buddha was filled with wandering holy men and yogis preaching a bewildering variety of unorthodox religious paths.

One of these was the austere way of extreme asceticism, self-discipline and self-mortification embraced by Mahavira (599–529 bce), another disillusioned north Indian aristocrat who had probably lived not long before the Buddha, and whose spiritual journey seems to have inspired the young Prince. Mahavira had renounced the world at the age of thirty to found a non-violent religious system that in time grew to become the Jain faith. As a Jain monk explains to a group of hostile Brahmins in one of the most ancient Jain scriptures, the most important sacrifice for Jains is not some priestly ritual, but the sacrifice of one's own body. 'Austerity is my sacrificial fire,' says the monk, 'and my life is the place where the fire is kindled. Mental and physical effort are my ladle for the oblation, and my body is the dung fuel for the fire, my actions my firewood. I offer up an oblation praised by the wise seers consisting of my restraint, effort and calm.'[9]

Mahavira's ideas initially appealed to Prince Siddhartha. According to Buddhist tradition, during his youth the Buddha had been sheltered from the horrors of the world by his loving father who refused to let his son leave the palace. But when the cosseted Prince, aided by a faithful servant, broke out and first encountered suffering, old age, disease and death, he was horrified by his belated exposure to human pain. Distraught and suddenly disillusioned with his comfortable and privileged life, he abandoned both his father's kingdom and his pregnant wife, and set off on a lonely quest to understand the roots of suffering, in an attempt to find a way to escape it.

Like many others at that time, the Buddha renounced worldly attachments and retreated to the wilderness, adopting the life of a wandering ascetic under the tutelage of a variety of teachers. He initially tried the path of extreme asceticism and rigorous penance, similar to that followed by Mahavira. 'My body became extremely lean,' said the Buddha according to one relatively early account of his life. 'When I thought I would touch the skin of my stomach, I actually took hold of my spine.'[10]

But asceticism was not the answer – it led only to more suffering – and the Buddha eventually abandoned intense self-denial in favour of his own solution to the problem. This was what he described as the Middle Path: the way of moderation between the extremes of self-torture and sensual indulgence, between worldliness and asceticism. His physical and mental discipline led to perfect control over his mind and body, and at the age of thirty-five, sitting under a sacred pipal tree and meditating without moving for forty-nine days, he at last achieved Enlightenment – and, with it, freedom from greed, hate and delusion. He realised that this moment of *bodhi* or 'awakening' (after which the religion was named) derived not from the punishing of his body but instead from simply learning the way to extinguish desire.

In his sermons, the Buddha explained how the force generated by a person's actions – karma – driven by desire and attachments bound one to a long cycle of *samsara*, or 'rebirth'. An early Buddhist text named the *Vinaya Pitaka* gives the Buddha's own explanation of his approach to a new disciple named Sona:

> Formerly, when you were a householder, were you skilled at playing the lute?
>
> Yes, Lord.
>
> When the strings of the lute were too taut, was it tuneful and fit for playing?
>
> Certainly not, Lord.
>
> And when they were slack, was the lute tuneful and fit for playing?
>
> No, Lord.
>
> But when the strings were neither too taut nor too slack but were keyed to an even pitch, was your lute tuneful and fit for playing?
>
> Yes, Lord.
>
> Even so, Sona, is the *dharma* that I propose.[11]

From this moment of revelation, the Buddha wandered through northern India teaching his fundamental ideas that everything is impermanent and that desire brings only the most fleeting of pleasures. The material world is ultimately an illusion, said the Buddha, a dream from which everyone must sooner or later awaken. Material pleasures 'are like a man who dreams of a fine house with fine gardens and luxurious delights. Yet when he awakens all of it vanishes. Distinctions of wealth and poverty, noble and common, are like a dream.'[12] The Buddha also taught his own solution to this problem: the *dharma* or moral path to the cessation of both desire and suffering. He passed on this message of remarkable emotional simplicity and clarity not in the complex Sanskrit of the Brahmins, but instead in the common Prakrit vernacular of the ordinary people.

The doctrine of the Buddha was at once a philosophy, an ideology and a method, a practical spiritual path of mental training and discipline that he assured his followers would free them from the pain inherent in existence. He questioned the claim of the Brahmins that the Vedas, the foundations of what would become known as Hinduism, were the infallible, divine source of spiritual truth and rejected their rituals as the means to salvation; he even disavowed the intellectual approach of more recent Hindu texts such as the Upanishads.[13] His message was instead based on love, kindness, compassion, detachment, non-violence, as well as intense meditation and personal self-discovery.

It was open to all and required no priestly intervention nor any rituals or sacrifices. Instead, it required only trust in the truths laid down by Buddha, his *dharma*, and the monastic community that he founded to keep his message alive. By following this path, he said, others could follow him in breaking free from the cycles of rebirth and the bonds of *samsara*, and so becoming Enlightened or Awakened Ones. In this way they could obtain nirvana, which means simply 'a flame blown out by the wind'.[14]

Nowhere does this world of the Buddha come more dramatically to life than in Ajanta, its earliest surviving expression in paint. The murals take us to an ancient world so astonishingly lifelike that even today, even in reproduction, the images of the Buddha's life can still make you gasp as you find yourself eyeball to eyeball with a watching monk who may have attended one of the early councils that gave shape to the Buddhist faith or with an Indian warrior who may have fought one of the battles over his relics.

So faithfully lifelike and realistic are the faces of the people depicted, so direct are their expressions, that you feel that these have to be portraits of real individuals, glowing still with the flame of eternal life. There is none of the idealisation or otherworldliness you see in the later images of the Bodhisattvas. Instead there is something deeply hypnotic about the soundless stare of these silent, often uncertain, early Buddhist faces. Their fleeting expressions are frozen, startled, as if suddenly surprised by the King of Varanasi's decision to loose his arrow or by the nobility of the great elephant breaking through the trees.

Indeed there is a profound sadness in the cycle of paintings, which are concerned with issues of justice, peace and non-violence: one image tells of a war breaking out over the Buddha's relics – something that went totally against the grain of everything he taught. This is followed by three Jataka scenes which all tell of the unjust killing of an innocent: successively, the loving wife of a king who is falsely accused of trying to kill him; the shooting of a boy as he fetches water for his parents in the forest; and a noble elephant king murdered by hunters for his tusks.[15] The viewer peers at these figures trying to catch some hint of the upheavals they witnessed and the strange sights they saw in ancient India. But these smooth, open, humane Indian faces, so full of melancholy, stare us down.

The most disconcerting thing about the people in these murals is that they appear so familiar. Two thousand years after they were painted, these faces convey with penetrating immediacy the character of the different sitters: the alert guard, the King caught in the excitement of the hunt, the obedient son fetching water. Indeed, so contemporary are the features, so immediately recognisable the emotions that play on the lips, that you have to keep reminding yourself that these sitters are not from our world, that they depict a court and jungle world of hunters and hunted, and Buddhist monks and devotees, that vanished from these hills more than two millennia ago.

But perhaps the biggest surprise is that the world portrayed in the murals is only occasionally one of lonely self-sacrifice or of stark ascetic renunciation – a shaven-headed, orange-robed monk lost in meditation, a hermit seeking salvation in the gloom of a rock-cut grotto, or a group of wizened devotees straining to hear the words of their teacher. This is what we might expect in a Buddhist mural. What we do not expect are scenes showing a prosperous and multicultural palatial environment full of riches and pleasures and beauty, and thronged with courtiers wearing jewels and enjoying music, shady bowers and the many pleasures of youth.

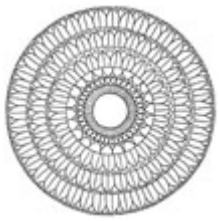
Surprisingly, at Ajanta the Buddha tends to be shown less in his monastic milieu and more often in the princely environment in which he grew up. Here among handsome princes and bare-chested nobles, princesses with tiaras of raat-ki-rani, Queen of the Night jasmine, languish lovelorn on swings and couches, while heavy-breasted and narrow-waisted dancing girls, dressed in diaphanous robes, jewels and girdles, perform beside lotus ponds, swaying to unheard music, ringing their *ghungroo* anklets. These court women wear little but spinels and chrysoberyl cat's eyes; they hold nothing but empurpled ebony flywhisks of burnished gold; gleaming rubies the colour of peacocks' blood flash against their dark skin.

The artists of Ajanta clearly saw nothing odd in this juxtaposition of monks and dancing girls, ascetics and princesses. There are no panels or boundaries in the Ajanta paintings beyond the physical borders of the cave, and the artists move from the world of the ascetic's cave to the pleasure gardens of the royal court and back again without acknowledging any essential separation between the two.

There is also a surprisingly international cast of characters in the murals. Recognisable among the crowds are many foreigners, including Persians, Parthians, Scythians, Ethiopians, Egyptians and even Greeks and Romans, each with distinct clothes, tunics, hairstyles, skin colours and drinking goblets. Even the pigments used in the paintings indicate international connections – the gorgeous blue, for example, was obtained from lapis lazuli imported from Badakshan. Ajanta was evidently built at the centre of a deeply globalised world.[16]

The earliest caves of Ajanta contain inscriptions which show that the whole enterprise of their excavation was the result of numerous small contributions, partly from pious monks and nuns, but also from local merchant guilds and craftsmen. The murals indicate that, by the time of Ajanta, India was not some self-contained island of Indianness, but already a cosmopolitan and surprisingly urban society full of traders from all over the world; in many cases it was the traders themselves who actually paid for these murals, such as the rich merchant Ghanamadada who, according to an inscription, donated the funds for Cave 12. To some extent, the murals may also have reflected the merchants' taste, which could explain the near absence of asceticism or even monasticism in the murals.

Either way, it is clear, the message of the Buddha was no longer restricted to any one caste or class or tribe. It was universal, and like later missionary religions was intended to be spread to the ends of the earth.



How did the ideas of an obscure ascetic begin their extraordinary journey around the world?

For its first 200 years, from the fifth to the third century bce, Buddhism is almost completely invisible in the archaeological record. There are no inscriptions. Not one Buddhist text survives from the period and only a handful of early Buddhist sites show even the slightest hint of occupation.[17] Those that do tend to be located in the same small area of the plains of north-east India and Nepal, bordering the banks of the Ganges, where the Buddha had lived and preached.

One such site is the monastery at Rajgir, the 'Mountain of the King', sixty miles from Patna, said to have been built by the physician Jivaka in the Buddha's lifetime, whose ruinous rectangular halls of simple rubble have been dated by archaeologists to the fifth century bce. Then there are a pair of small early stupas: one is at Vaisali, the capital of the powerful Licchavi clan; and the other is the site of the Buddha's birth at Lumbini. Here archaeologists discovered a small saucer-shaped mud burial mound that was dug into during the mid-third century bce, apparently to extract the relics within. It must therefore have dated from before that period. From the same period, the archaeologists also discovered a wooden structure surrounding a small courtyard lying within the Maya Devi Temple, the site of the grove where the Buddha was born.[18]

The man who ordered the excavation of this early stupa and extracted the Buddha's relics is the first Indian whose voice survives for us in his own words, or who has left us texts written in stone in any comprehensible Indian script. The Emperor Ashoka was one of the most remarkable figures in all Indian history. He was also the man who helped raise Buddhism from what was still effectively a relatively small,

even local cult, into one of the world's great religions.[19]

Ashoka's family, the Mauryas, first come into historical focus just after the invasion of the Punjab by Alexander the Great in the fourth century bce, as the Macedonian conqueror burned Persepolis and pursued the last Achaemenid Emperor, Darius III, into the furthest satrapies of the Persian Empire, in what is now Afghanistan and Pakistan.

When the victorious Alexander arrived on the banks of the Indus in the summer of 327 bce, the King of Taxila wisely decided against challenging the Greeks. Instead, he met Alexander in Swat and guided him through the forests of rhododendron and alpine clematis to the walls of the city. Here, for the first time, Alexander's troops were able to rest and take in the Indian scene. To the Greeks, familiar with the glories of Athens, Babylon, Susa and Egyptian Memphis, the buildings of Taxila were unremarkable: the houses were made of mud and uncut stone, and were laid out without any central order or plan.

But what did amaze them were the peoples who lived there. 'Physically, the Indians are slim,' wrote Alexander's Admiral, Nearchus.

> They are tall and much lighter in weight than other men … they wear earrings of ivory (at least the rich do), and they dye their beards, some the very whitest of white, others dark blue, red or purple or even green … they wear a tunic and throw an outer mantle around their shoulders: another is wound round their head. All except the very humblest carry parasols in summer.[20]

Others wore no clothes at all. Two miles outside Taxila, the Greeks came across fifteen naked and motionless gymnosophists ('naked wise men'), Indian holy men, who the Greeks say were 'Brahmins and *sramans*' (that is, Hindus and ascetics, probably Buddhists or Digambara Jains). The gymnosophists laughed at the Greeks' cloaks and knee-high boots and told them to undress if they wanted to talk.[21] 'But the heat of the sun', wrote one of Alexander's men, 'was so scorching that nobody could have borne to walk barefoot, especially at midday.'

So the Greeks kept their clothes on, and the senior guru questioned them about Socrates, Pythagoras and Diogenes. One of the Holy Men 'gave a discourse in which he stated that "the best teaching is that which removes pleasure and pain from the soul" ', a phrase which has a Buddhist ring to it.[22] Later, the gurus, still naked, dined at Alexander's table. '[They] ate their food while standing,' wrote one witness, 'balanced on one leg.' One of the leading gymnosophists, whom the Greeks called Calanus, followed the troops and took on pupils among the Macedonians. He became mortally ill in Babylon in 323 bce and decided to throw himself on a ritual funeral pyre. He met his end with complete composure, to the amazement of the watching Greeks.[23]

Another of Alexander's soldiers may well have brought the ideas of Buddhism back to the Peloponnese. The sceptic philosopher and poet Pyrrho of Elis (c.360–270 bce) was with Alexander in India in the 330s bce and according to his third-century biographer, Diogenes Laertius, he was profoundly influenced by 'the doctrines of the gymnosophists'.

On his return to Greece, he adopted a life of wandering and austerity, living in solitude and avoiding what he regarded as the pointless seduction of sensual pleasures. He explained to his followers that the only way to avoid suffering and unhappiness was to control desire and reject the passions, to cultivate instead equanimity, indifference and suspension of judgement. He embraced a position of agnosticism and, according to one account, practised an early form of yoga, remaining 'in a single position, unmoved, all day long'. This, he said, would result in 'an undisturbed mental state' of deep calm, peace and 'inner and outer tranquillity' and a life 'free from suffering'.[24]

According to the prolific Greek historian and philosopher Plutarch (46–120 ce), at the same time as Alexander met the gymnosophists he also encountered a young Indian warrior whose family would do far more to spread Buddhism over a far wider area even than Pyrrho. Chandragupta Maurya was a political refugee from Magadha, modern Bihar. He was completing his education in Taxila, a great centre of learning, which had been home to the Sanskrit grammarian Panini and the political scientist Kautilya.[25] Plutarch records that 'Sadrocottus [the Greek name for Chandragupta], when he was a stripling, saw Alexander, and we are told that he often said in later times that Alexander missed making himself master of India, since its king was hated and despised on account of his baseness and low birth.' According to later Jain sources, Chandragupta hero-worshipped the Macedonian, joined Alexander's army and eventually determined to emulate his conquests.[26]

Alexander fought one last great battle before he left India, the Battle of the Hydaspes River; if the late Jain sources are to be believed, Chandragupta could well have been present on the Greek side. Alexander's opponent was Porus, King of the Punjab, who fought with an army led by a force of massed elephants. Alexander defeated the Raja in a bloody monsoon battle in which the badly wounded King of the Punjab remained perched on his elephant, encouraging his men to fight on. When captured, he refused to bow to Alexander and when asked how he should be treated replied, 'like a king'.[27]

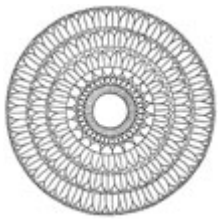
Impressed by his bravery and dignity in defeat, Alexander reinstated him in power as his deputy. It was a battle that clearly meant a lot to Alexander as he produced a set of gold and silver commemorative coins with his head on one side and on the reverse an image of himself on horseback attacking Porus' elephant.

Alexander was amazed and excited by the remarkable prosperity of India and the number of well-ordered cities that greeted his forces as they advanced south and east.[28] But on the banks of the Jhelum Alexander's soldiers – wet, footsore, homesick and far from home – refused to advance any further. Alexander was forced to head for home, never to return.[29]

It was the power vacuum that followed Alexander's departure that the young Chandragupta Maurya (ruled c.320–297 bce) determined to fill. In due course, he overthrew the Nanda kings of northern India and established a new empire that included much territory that until then had been under the rule first of the Persians of Persepolis and then of the Macedonian Greeks.

By 320 bce, Chandragupta had defeated his Indian rivals and consolidated his hold on the Gangetic plain. He then acquired the north-west provinces of India from Alexander's successor Seleucus, one of the Macedonian's original Companions, who had commanded the infantry at the Battle of the Hydaspes; the two men may have fought shoulder to shoulder. Chandragupta gained this territory in exchange for 500 (out of his 9,000) war elephants and an alliance sealed by the marriage of one of his sons to the daughter of Seleucus.[30] He also threw in a basket of Indian aphrodisiacs which he said would make the Greeks 'as randy as birds'.[31] The alliance continued into the next generation. In one exchange, Chandragupta asked Seleucus' half-Bactrian son, Antiochus, to send him sweet wine, dried figs and a sophist. Antiochus replied that he would send the wine and the figs, but that 'Greek laws forbade him to send a sophist.'[32]

After Chandragupta had abdicated in 297 bce, to become a Jain monk, his son Bindusara continued to cultivate good relations with his Greek neighbours.[33] It was Chandragupta's grandson Ashoka who continued his career of conquest into what is now Afghanistan. He would be remembered in Buddhist sources as the man who helped Buddhism spread far beyond the boundaries of India.[34]



Under Ashoka, the Mauryan Empire grew into the largest empire India had yet seen, while its capital, Pataliputra, modern Patna, became quite probably the largest city in the world. According to the report of Megasthenes, a Greek ambassador who visited just before Ashoka was born, the city already covered ten square miles and was surrounded by a wall twenty-one miles long broken by sixty-four gates and 570 towers. This meant it was around twice the size of early Rome, three times the size of Alexandria and eleven times larger than Athens, with a population of some 200,000.

Pataliputra was a profoundly cosmopolitan place, in close diplomatic, military and cultural contact with the adjoining Seleucid Empire which stretched from Bactria through Persia to Anatolia, and with whose Greek kings the Mauryan family had intermarried.[35] Ashoka in his youth was sent as viceroy to Taxila, which still had a large Greek population, left stranded in India after the death of Alexander in Babylon.

By 261 bce, around 250 years after the death of the Buddha, Ashoka's lands stretched, with varying degrees of authority, from Kandahar to the Deccan. Ashoka then decided to wage war on his most formidable rivals. The Kalinga kingdom was based in modern Odisha and stretched down the prosperous east coast of India. The prolonged and bloody campaign to crush the Kalingas was militarily successful and led to Ashoka exercising overlordship over a larger area of the Indian subcontinent than anyone else before British colonial rule; but it also resulted in terrible carnage and destruction.[36]

Ashoka, ironically for a man whose name means 'without sorrow', suffered intense guilt for the pain,

misery and devastation he had caused. He may already have shown favour to the Buddhists in his kingdom; but this was no longer enough, and his interest in the teachings of the Buddha deepened.[37] He began visiting the sites associated with the Buddha's life and decided to let his Buddhist faith guide his policies, indeed to put the propagation of Buddhism at the very centre of his rule. 'More than two and a half years have passed since I became a Buddhist layman,' he records, 'but I was not zealous. Now more than a year has passed since I approached the Sangha [Buddhist monastic community] and I have become much more ardent and committed.'[38]

The edicts he ordered to be carved on rocks around his empire as a sort of early public-address system record his motivation. During the Kalinga war, he wrote,

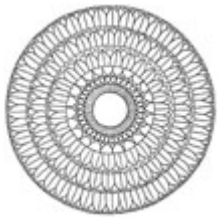
> One hundred and fifty thousand people were deported, one hundred thousand were killed and many times that number perished …
>
> On conquering Kalinga, the Beloved of the Gods [Ashoka] felt remorse, for when an independent country is conquered, the slaughter, death and deportation of people is extremely grievous: all suffer violence, murder and separation from their loved ones. Even those who are fortunate to have escaped and whose love is undiminished [by the brutalising effects of war] suffer from the misfortunes of their friends, colleagues and relatives. This [suffering] is shared by all men and is considered profoundly painful [by the Emperor]. Today if a thousandth part of those people who died when Kalinga was annexed were to suffer similarly, it would weigh heavily on him. The inscription of *dharma* has been engraved so that any sons or grandsons that I may have should not think of gaining new conquests … They should think only of conquest by *dharma* to be a true conquest.[39]

Everything about these inscriptions – the oldest written first-person statements in Indian history – is remarkable. Not one Buddhist text or inscription survives in its original form from before the moment Ashoka carved his first rock edict; yet suddenly from this point we have almost a waterfall of words cascading over the rock shelters and boulders of northern India, from Kandahar to the Deccan, giving us for the first time a ruler with a fully formed and rounded persona.[40] It allows us, as one historian nicely put it, 'to peer over the palisades' of Ashoka's Pataliputra palace and to see in detail the consultations taking place within.[41]

These remarkable inscriptions reveal the uniqueness of Ashoka, the first king in history to present himself as an enlightened, humane and gentle philosopher, rather than as merely strong and powerful: he even claimed to be available to his subjects 'at any time, anywhere'.[42] Even as a simple statement of personal grief, pain and repentance, or as a confession of religious conversion, the inscriptions would be startling; it is hard to think of any other victorious ruler in history who has given expression to anything like it – it is a rare ruler, even today, who is strong enough to say, 'I'm sorry.' Certainly, Ashoka's emotional renunciation of war and his traumatised remorse for the suffering he has caused are in striking contrast to the statements of any of Ashoka's near contemporaries.

Darius, the Great King of the Achaemenid Persians, for example, also ran a fairly tolerant and multi-religious empire and also had multilingual inscriptions carved to mark his conquests – indeed these probably inspired Ashoka. But in his public self-expression of kingship Darius boasts of his strength and power. He proudly details his killing of his enemies, even going as far as illustrating the captive rebels, their hands tied behind their backs, with ropes around their necks, and shows himself with his foot planted on a prostrate captive. This, in turn, is positively mild compared to the sculptures of the ancient Assyrians, who filled their banquet halls with bas-reliefs of the deaths, torture and mass impalement of their defeated enemies, the destruction of their cities and the enslavement of their people.

But Ashoka shuns both bloodshed and boastfulness. He makes no mention of the size of his empire or his wealth or power. Instead, in an earnest and highly individual, personal voice, he depicts himself as a gentle and compassionate ruler impatient to spread his ideas of non-violence, respect, morality and tolerance.[43]



According to a tradition preserved in a Sri Lankan text, the *Dipavamsa*, Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism was the result of a conversation with a young Buddhist monk he met begging on the roads of Pataliputra.

Ashoka had long been on a quest for religious meaning, but none of the holy men he had summoned to the palace had been able to give satisfactory answers to his questions. Then he met the monk Nigrodha as he was begging for alms in the capital, 'a handsome young man of tranquil appearance, who walks along the road like an elephant, fearless and endowed with the ornament of tranquillity'. According to this source, it was Nigrodha's fearlessness and calm charisma as much as his preaching that persuaded Ashoka to become a lay disciple of the Buddha and to promote the faith throughout his kingdom.[44]

For his contemporaries, Ashoka's ideas must have been astonishingly radical, even revolutionary; they certainly changed the course of Buddhist history as dramatically as the conversion of the Emperor Constantine would change that of Christianity. At the beginning of Ashoka's reign, Buddhism was still just one of a number of dissident, heterodox religious systems challenging the monopoly of the Brahmins and their Vedic animal sacrifices. But in 250 bce, in the aftermath of the Kalinga campaign, Ashoka took it upon himself to spread the ideas of Buddhism around the world. For the small Buddhist community, and especially for its monastic core, the Sangha, the enthusiastic patronage of the region's most powerful ruler changed everything.

Following his adoption of the *dharma* (moral duty), Ashoka decided to reach out to his people and to communicate with them directly, and with striking candour, in his own words: as he stated simply in one of the first rock edicts: 'I am [now] openly a Buddhist.'[45] Because he wished them to re-examine their own religious ideas, he placed multiple copies of his different inscriptions across the landscape, on hilltops and river banks, in places of pilgrimage and at the sites of fairs and religious festivals.[46] He asked his people to practise compassion and to examine their own ideas of morality, but did not command them to follow either Buddhism or Ashoka's 'civil religion', his own idiosyncratic personal conception of exactly what *dharma* entailed in public life, which towards the end of his life he seems to have begun to spread in preference to the more conventional *dharma* of the Buddha.[47] Instead he recorded that he continued to give patronage to the Brahmins and other faiths, and recommended tolerance for other people's ideas. He set out a vision of a public culture in which every sect respectfully debates every other and suggests:

> guarding one's speech so that neither praising one's own sect nor blaming others' sects should occur on improper occasions; and it should always be expressed with moderation … And others' sects should be honoured on every occasion. Acting thus, one both promotes one's own sect and benefits others' sects. Acting otherwise, one both harms one's own sect and wrongs others' sects. For whoever praises their own sect or blames another's sect with a view to showing it in a good light, instead severely damages it. Coming together is good, so that people should both hear and appreciate each other's teachings.[48]

Ashoka commended to his people the path of morality, non-violence and moderation – the conquest of the self; but, while advocating tolerance and pluralism, he made it clear that he regarded Buddhism as the best way for his people to achieve this. 'Not only high ranked persons can reach this aim,' he wrote. 'No, common people can also reach it, if they strive to do so.'[49]

To begin the new mission, Ashoka toured his dominions for 256 nights, issuing edicts and explaining his new faith. To encourage the diffusion of his ideas, Ashoka improved the communications of his Empire: the inscriptions talk about the maintenance of the royal roads, stretching from Taxila (near modern Islamabad in Pakistan) to Tamralipti (near modern Calcutta in West Bengal), from where ships sailed not only to Sri Lanka but to South-east Asia and Indonesia. On his return to the capital Ashoka is said to have organised the Third Buddhist Council in his capital, Pataliputra. It was then that he decided to open up the eight original stupas containing the remains of the Buddha and enshrine their contents in monuments around the world: later Buddhist legend had it that Ashoka constructed as many as 84,000 stupas across his realms and beyond.[50] So effectively did the building of stupas establish Ashoka's memory as a *chakravartin* (or literally the Ruler Who Turns the Wheel of Law – that is, a universal ruler) that many ambitious monarchs who followed him did the same.[51]

With the relics went missionaries, or rather what he calls '*dharma* ministers', imperial agents who were sent out in all directions: east to Burma and Suvarnabhumi, the Lands of Gold dotting the oceans of South-east Asia; north to the steppe nomads in Central Asia; and north-west to the Hellenistic patchwork of Seleucid and Ptolemaic Greek states that had been left scattered by the death of Alexander, from

Afghanistan to Cyrene on the North African coast of the Mediterranean.

'My envoys', wrote Ashoka, 'are busy in all sects, establishing the Dharma, increasing the interest in Dharma, and attending to the welfare and happiness of those who are devoted to Dharma among the Greeks, the Kambojas, the Gandaharans, the Rishthikas, the Pitinikas and the other peoples of the West.'[52] There is some evidence that at least one Greek ruler adopted the language of Ashoka, and that an inscription of a later Greek ruler named Antiochus of Commagene, who ruled in eastern Anatolia, contains echoes of Ashoka's rock edicts.[53]

To the south, he sent his own son and daughter to his ally Devanampiya Tissa, the Raja of Sri Lanka. The two rulers were already said to be 'intimate friends, united by faithful affection', and there is some archaeological evidence that Buddhism may already have established a foothold in the south of the island before the arrival of Ashoka's envoys.[54] With his children Ashoka sent the Buddha's collarbone and rice bowl and a sprig of the Bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya, under which the Buddha had received his Enlightenment.[55] According to tradition, Ashoka's son Mahinda preached for twenty-six days in a royal park outside the south gate of Anuradhapura. Vast crowds assembled, and many converted.[56] According to the *Dipavamsa*, Ashoka also sent Tissa gifts which were used for a Buddhist re-coronation, and a message encouraging him 'to take refuge in the Buddha as I have taken my refuge in the Buddha'. In 250 bce, the Raja himself formally converted to Buddhism, donating the park for the monks of the Sangha to build a great monastery and building an enormous stupa to house the precious relics.

Soon cave monasteries spread across the island, filling rock shelters or carved into the face of cliffs.[57] Very early Buddhist monasteries were founded in Anuradhapura in the north of the island, in Tissamaharama in the south and on the newly rediscovered and excavated site of Rajagala atop a mountain in the centre, where an early Brahmi inscription says Mahinda's relics were laid to rest within a shallow stupa.[58] It was probably in Anuradhapura, the largest city in South Asia after Pataliputra, that the Buddha's teachings were first written down on palm-leaf folios around 50 bce.[59]

Up to this point, India had been receiving at least some of its religious and artistic ideas from peoples migrating into India: not only did the Greeks leave their impress for several hundred years on the arts of northern India, but the columns and bull capitals erected by Ashoka, especially at his palace at Pataliputra, show the clear influence of Persian forms, perhaps brought to India by sculptors fleeing Alexander's burning of Persepolis.[60] These close Persian borrowings only add to the mythological phantasmagoria of the arts associated with Ashoka: eagle-beaked griffins and snarling Persianate winged lions join battle with fabulous beasts born in the wildest recesses of the ancient Indian imagination, as *makaras* – part crocodile, part tiger, part fish – and other creatures unknown to zoology snap their jaws and toss their horns at winged bulls that seem to have flown in from Iran.

But that direction of influence would soon be reversed. With Brahmanical taboos on seafaring effectively abolished by the Buddha's new teachings, Buddhism was ready dramatically to burst out of the confines of India. For the next 1,000 years, it was ideas from India – the seeds first scattered to the four winds by Ashoka – that would take root around the rest of Asia and beyond, intertwining and sometimes fusing with ideas from other civilisations.[61]

But in the years that followed the death of Ashoka, Buddhism would rarely be a faith disseminated by rulers, and almost never one imposed by the sword. Instead, perhaps counter-intuitively for a faith that embraced poverty and renunciation as an ideal, it was spread around the globe most effectively by wealthy merchants engaged in trade.

It is probable that the Buddha originally envisaged his monks leading a peripatetic life – the life of the wandering thinker that he himself had led. 'You cannot travel on the path', he said, 'unless you become the path itself … Go, monks, preach the Noble Doctrine … Let not two of you go in the same direction.'[62]

Yet by the first century bce, when the first great rock-cut monasteries began to be dug into the mountains of the Central Indian Deccan plateau, Buddhist monks had already begun to turn away from the road to

embrace instead the more sedentary life of the monk in his cell. This took place in a new institution, the monastery, or *vihara*.[63]

As in the cycle of the Indian farmer's year, it was the monsoon that acted as the engine of change. For the rains made travel impossible, and since the Buddha did not want his monks drowning in floodwater, he allowed them a rain retreat. During this time the *bhikkhus* – literally 'beggars', as the Buddha called his followers – were allowed to congregate on higher ground and to live in huts of wattle and daub, or better still in natural caves in the rockface of the Himalayas and the mountains of the Western Ghats. It was from these sites, in time, that the first great Buddhist monasteries arose.[64]

Today, though little visited and much neglected, over 1,000 early rock-cut cave monasteries still honeycomb the ghats and overlook the coast of western India.[65] Arguably the most ancient near-intact Buddhist monastery in the world is the great hall of Bhaja, built into the side of a cliff face of a remote range of hills high in the Western Ghats.[66] It lies to the west of Pune in the wild heartlands of the Deccan and dates from the early second century BCE. Open to the environment at one end and entered by a magnificent horseshoe arch thirty feet tall, it still miraculously preserves its ancient wooden roof beams, like the wrecked keel of a prehistoric ark smashed against the rocky ceiling of the cave. The hard teak blades of these rafters cut the light from the shade with the same Manichaean clarity that they did two millennia ago.

This amazing masterwork of early Buddhist cave architecture, every bit as spectacular as anything at Petra, is a prototype of the sort of cave monastery which would later spread with Buddhism over the Himalayas to Afghanistan, China and Japan, or by sea to Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and the rest of South-east Asia. The roots of all this lie scattered around these stark Deccan hills, alone among the crags and dragon's-back peaks, apparently forgotten by all.

This was also one of the very first spaces in Asia made for congregational worship. It was created as part of a momentous change in religious practice and provided a setting for a new form of communal Buddhist worship directed at the stupa, which had come to be seen as the living embodiment of the Buddha and the heart of Buddhist faith and devotion. For the stupa, visually austere and minimalist often contained what the inscriptions described as 'relics of the Blessed one, Shakyamuni, which is endowed with life … infused with morality … wisdom, emancipation, knowledge and vision'. In this hall, the monks would gather together to chant and seek the blessings of what they believed to be the living presence of the Buddha. Later generations of Christians would come to see the tabernacle, located in the same space at the end of the apse, as containing for them the real presence of Christ in much the same way.[67]

Bhaja is usually described as a cave temple but it is really more like sculpture on an epic scale: an entire range of monastic buildings hewn out of the living rock and elaborately decorated with sculpted *trompe l'oeils*. Carved window frames, blind arches and tiers of fretwork mouldings give way to bamboo railings and balconies out of which half-naked men and women peer, as if surprised by the presence of a visitor, gazing out arm in arm from the terrace of their ancient apartment block as they survey the valley below. These carvings mimic long-lost multi-storeyed wooden buildings, all physical traces of which vanished many millennia ago.[68]

And that is, in a sense, the point: as one inscription puts it, these *chaitya* halls were deliberately made to endure a *kalpa* – an entire cosmic age. They were built, if not for eternity, then at least for the foreseeable future, as 'a stairway to the city of liberation'.[69] The dedication in another Deccan cave complex gives an indication of the motives of the patrons who paid for this work: 'Realizing that life, youth, wealth and happiness are transitory', it reads, Varahadeva, Prime Minister to the great King Harisena, 'made this dwelling to be occupied by the best of ascetics. It resembles the palaces of the Lord of the Gods, clothed in brilliance. As long as the sun shines this spotless cave may be enjoyed! Even a single flower offered here can yield freedom and the fruit known as paradise. The wise man will show reverence.'[70]

Flanking the *chaitya* hall lies a *vihara*, once used for community discussions and theological debates; beyond extend the monastic living quarters. One cave whose roof is still black with petrified soot was presumably a kitchen; to one side, meals were eaten on a long low platform in the centre of what was clearly the refectory. Beyond that are the lines of austere dormitory cells, each with two stone beds crowned with stone pillows. Carved into each is a bookshelf for holy texts, a rod on which to hang monastic robes and a wall niche for an oil lamp. The monks could have vacated yesterday and, equipped with a sleeping mat to roll out, they could move back in tomorrow.

At the end of the range of halls and cells is the jagged roofline of a natural cave which shelters a cluster

of fourteen circular stupas, some containing the ashes of the monastery's founding saints and abbots, dating from the third century bce. Beyond is carved a magnificent frieze of the heavens, full of restless, churning energy.

These sculptures, sometimes said to be the oldest surviving stone sculpture of any Hindu god, probably show the sun god Surya in his four-horse chariot, with two female attendants and an escort of armed guards, trampling underfoot the coils of the demon of darkness. Flanking him is a regal figure covered with garlands and mounted on a caparisoned elephant, probably the god Indra on his mount Airavata. In the syncretic Indian way, early Buddhism adopted, or even helped create, many of the first images of the great Vedic gods, whose form had previously been thought too sacred for depiction. Early Buddhism also gave form in stone to the popular cults that existed alongside them, especially in the rural hinterland. Threads of *naga* snake worship and *yakshi* fertility tree cults run through the patchwork of early Buddhist art and literature, and weave seamlessly in and out of images inspired by the Buddha's philosophy.[71]

These early Buddhist sculptures represent a break with the traditions of early Vedic Hinduism, which up to this point had either expressed itself in perishable materials such as wood or else had been entirely aniconic. Before the time of Ashoka, Indians seem to have carved no stone statues, built no stone temples and created no great stone palaces. This suggests that religious images were either made in perishable materials or else were unimportant and possibly even forbidden in the religious ideals of early Indian cultures.

But from around the time of Ashoka, monumental stone sculptures become common throughout India across a number of different religions, sects and cults: Buddhists, Jains, Ajivikas, devotees of *naga* snake cults and worshippers of *yaksha* tree spirits, as well as the adepts of the Hero cults around Vasudeva and his son, Samkarsana. These would soon evolve, probably first in Mathura, into the worship of Krishna and the whole pantheon of devotional Vaishnava Hinduism, but initially may have been separate from the religious world, and hymns, associated with Brahmanical Vedic fire sacrifices. Sometimes these first devotional images were freestanding and carved in the round, at other times they were sculpted on the walls or railings of sacred spaces, in exactly the same spaces that these two forms of devotion came together.

The foundations of early apsidal (that is, ending in a semi-circle) temples, some with decorated pillars, begin appearing in stone with increasing frequency from around the mid-second century bce. They do so with such confidence and iconographic certainty as to suggest that lost wooden prototypes must already have been common by this period, but early Hindu temples and stone sculpture are at first frustratingly elusive compared to the increasingly voluminous Buddhist output.[72]

These early images are full of surprises. The first Buddhist art is strikingly different from the pure and philosophically abstracted Buddhism admired around the world today, with its familiar image of the Buddha lost in meditation. Instead, early Buddhist art is aniconic, yet every bit as vibrant, crowded and cacophonous as so much later Buddhist art is still, silent and quietly meditative.

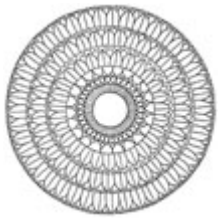
One reason for this is that the art of the first Buddhist monasteries is shot through with the cosmology of ancient animist cults that existed before the arrival of the new teachings. The first Buddhist monks believed that they lived in a spiritually charged landscape, alive with powerful local godlings and spirits – called *yakshas* when male and *yakshis* when female – who took up residence in the trees and stones and streams around monasteries. These spirits personified the forces of nature and revealed themselves at will.

No scriptures associated with these cults survive, and all we know about them comes from their Buddhist rivals who subdued and appropriated their deities: according to the *Atanatiya Sutta*, for example, the nature spirits 'haunt the lonely and remote recesses of the forest … where breezes from the pastures blow, hidden from men, suitable for meditation'.[73] They were believed to be capable of attacking or defending, seducing or possessing their monastic neighbours, depending on how the monks fed and propitiated them. They were part of a landscape filled with ghosts howling in the charnel grounds and dangerously seductive *yakshis* hanging from tree branches.[74]

While *yakshis* are associated mainly with trees, the serpentine *nagas* are creatures of the deep. They were affiliated with rain, rivers, lakes and the high seas, where they were believed to guard vast subterranean treasures.[75] All these spirits, snake kings and demigods dwell in an exuberantly depicted natural world in which jungle tendrils curl, geese dance, birds sing (and sometimes talk), elephants lumber through the forest and lines of tiny ants mount banana fronds. Here the biological boundary between the human and the natural worlds is profoundly blurred.

In all this early art, you feel strongly the Buddhist intuition that the natural and animal worlds are closely

related to humankind through great cycles of reincarnation: a neglected Elephant Queen in the earliest murals of the Ajanta Caves may be reborn as the Queen of Varanasi, yet she remains the same essence. Animals are therefore depicted with the same love and respect as humans. After all, in a world where trees could be spirits and the waters are alive with sentient beings, ethical living requires treading softly on this earth, guarding the purity of water and preserving the life of both trees and animals.



The Buddhist monastic cells and halls of Bhaja were already 200 years old when Jesus of Nazareth led his first disciples into the Judaean hills. They also pre-date almost all the surviving written texts of Buddhism; all we know about them comes from the Prakrit and hybrid Sanskrit inscriptions left on the rock walls by the monks and their patrons and devotees.

These inscriptions are something of a surprise as they reveal that, by the first century bce, the great monasteries of ancient India and Afghanistan already appear to have been as wealthy as those in medieval Europe, and in several cases had their own mints, water mills and oil presses and owned landed estates, some of which were worked by slaves.[76] The idea of Buddhist monks and nuns as world-renouncing ascetics seems already to have been an ideal that was often no longer reflected in the lived reality of Indian Buddhist monasticism. In the Deccan, the monasteries grew, worked and exported cotton and operated mines.[77] They even lent money at interest in order to support themselves, so turning themselves into the first banks in South Asia. In one early Buddhist text, the Buddha himself is made to declare that 'endowments for the sake of the Buddha, the Dharma and the Community must be lent on interest' and required a dated, witnessed and written loan contract.[78] With their strong links to trading guilds, the monasteries soon became active beneficiaries of the growing trade networks of South and Central Asia.[79]

The first century bce was a period of terrific urban growth and expanding international trade, and these early Buddhist monasteries, remote as they may seem now, were originally built on the great trade routes of their time. The valleys they crown once saw the passage of caravans bringing luxury goods – ebony, teak and sandalwood, ivory and Indian cotton and silk, pepper and cinnamon – to the coast.

The Buddha seems, in fact, surprisingly open to the idea of the accumulation of wealth, which he recognised as a necessary evil until such time as nirvana could be achieved.[80] According to tradition, the Buddha's first lay devotees were two merchants who gave him bowls of gruel and honey after his Enlightenment, and the Jataka stories about the Buddha's past lives often contain many tales of shipwrecked merchants or itinerant traders in distress. Indeed, in these tales merchants are invariably depicted as the heroes of these stories: self-sacrificing and intrepid men of great bravery who undertook long and dangerous journeys for the good of others. Early collections of Buddhist biographical stories also contain tales of monks who had earlier led lives as merchants and they are often lauded as much for their business acumen as for their spiritual wisdom.[81] Some early Buddhist scriptures even contain rates of currency conversion.[82]

Moreover, for Buddhists, wealth could be taken as a sign of good karma, the positive result of good actions and donations given during previous lifetimes; poverty, conversely, could be interpreted as a sign of moral failure, and the concept of debt was often used in the Jataka tales as a simile for spiritual obstacles. At the same time, supporting the Buddha's *dharma* and his monasteries with donations was understood as a way to increase one's material and spiritual wealth and status, carrying the donor 'over the oceans of suffering', both in this lifetime and in those that followed.[83]

Buddhism clearly resonated with the merchant classes of early India and came to thrive within their urban world. To some extent it even adopted their language: the Buddha himself is described in some Buddhist scriptures as a 'caravan leader' who leads his followers 'beyond the sandy deserts of rebirth'.[84] In one story telling of his earlier births, the Buddha is even described as a 'merchant of the ocean' who collected supplies and set out on the Great Ocean.[85]

Buddhist merchants were encouraged to look to their saviour for protection on the road or at sea, and in its art and literature Buddhism actively projected itself as the protector of trade.[86] The oldest surviving

image of a seafarer in distress is from the second century bce stupa railings of the monastery of Bharhut in Central India, which shows a sea monster about to swallow a boat. A Jataka story of a Bodhisattva saving a shipwrecked merchant from ravenous *yakshi* demonesses is depicted in several sculptures, while Ajanta contains a mural of a monk flying in like a Buddhist avatar of Superman, robes trailing behind him, to rescue his storm-tossed sailor brother.[87]

All this is in contrast to the evolving Hinduism of the Brahmins who were – at least in theory – forbidden by their laws from travelling by sea or interacting closely, or eating with, polluting foreigners. One of the Dharmasutra law codes explicitly states that 'making voyages by sea' and 'trading in all sorts of merchandise' are sins punishable by loss of caste. *The Laws of Manu* and some of the Puranas make similar threats and injunctions. Indeed some early Hindu law codes initially grouped businessmen with drunkards, sadists and lepers.[88]

The close relationship between merchants and the Buddhist monastic movement is clear in the inscriptions of the earliest Buddhist pilgrimage sites where, as at Ajanta, generous donations from traders and craftsmen guilds paid for much of the work.[89] A richly carved gateway pillar at the Buddhist stupa of Sanchi in Madhya Pradesh speaks of it being donated by the local Guild of Ivory Carvers.[90] Likewise, the 109 coastal caves of Kanheri, now, thanks to land reclamation, marooned in the suburbs of Bombay but originally on the offshore island of Salsette, contain several sculptures of Avalokitesvara as the protector from the Eight Perils likely to be suffered by travellers, and especially as the saviour of merchants and mariners in distress: as one of the Buddhist sutras (scriptures) puts it, 'if one happens to fall into the dreadful ocean, the abode of Nagas, marine monsters and demons, he has but to think of Avalokitesvara, and he shall never sink'.[91] A visiting trader from Byzantine Egypt, Cosmas Indikopleustes, mentions that the nearby port of Kalyan was a major gateway for the export of cotton and other Indian textiles heading west to Alexandria; some of these were woven by Buddhist nuns. The same textiles depicted in the murals of Ajanta have turned up at excavations on the Red Sea coast of Egypt.[92]

These caves were crowd-funded by the monks themselves, helped along, according to the sponsors' inscriptions carved on each pillar, by a horse trader, a blacksmith, a physician, a housewife, an ivory carver, stone polishers from the nearby town of Sopara, a goldmith and various wealthy sea captains.[93] One of these was a devout Buddhist from Bengal who recorded his visit and the endowment left for the excavation of a meditation room as well as for clothing for the monks. Here, as elsewhere in the Buddhist world at this time, the images chosen to adorn the caves reflect the aspirations and fears of the donors, and focus on the ability of the Bodhisattvas to save merchants from all their worst nightmares: enslavement, shipwreck, wild beasts and sea monsters. These were all dangers from whose grasp Avalokitesvara and his consort Tara were believed to be effective saviours.[94]

On the east coast we see a similar situation where one of the donors to the coastal monastery of Ghantasala in Andhra describes himself as a great sea captain, a *mahanavika*, and the son of a prosperous local rice farmer and landowner. This was a time during which some of the children who might usually be expected to follow their fathers into agriculture instead left home to become sailors and merchants on the high seas.

The monasteries acted as urban enclaves in the countryside where prosperous Buddhist farmers could borrow money from the monks and invest it in family trading voyages. The monks would later be rewarded by pious donations when the merchants returned from successful expeditions funded by monastic credit, steering their way home to the white stupas on the hilltops which marked the estuary ports. Here rivers flowed into the sea, and caravans from the interior hinterland would come to unload their goods. The reach and wealth of such Andhra *mahanavika* sea captains are clear from the gold seal of one such Buddhist captain which was found as far away as the western coast of peninsular Thailand.[95]

At Karle, near Pune, the international connections of the monastery are even clearer: here in a magnificent rock-cut basilica the size of a cathedral, six pillars were donated by men describing themselves as 'Yavanas' – foreign converts to Buddhism, possibly Greek-speaking traders from Bactria or Roman Egypt who had taken Buddhist names.[96] Another pillar was given by a rich banker named Bhutupala of Vejayanti, who could have helped finance the expeditions that brought these Yavanas to India. At Nasik, an entire monastery and three cisterns were paid for by three generations of an expat Yavana family, recorded as being resident nearby.[97]

The same Yavanas 'whose prosperity never waned' and who supplied 'cool fragrant wine' also appear with surprising regularity in early Tamil poetry, and their presence is hinted at by the Roman coins and

other expensive western trade goods which have turned up in many monastic sites.[98] One inscription refers to a donation from the 'Raumakas' which some suggest could be a Deccani rendering of Romans.[99] No surprise then that Buddhist sites have often yielded hoards of Roman coins, even when they lie well inland from the ports frequented by the sailors from Roman Egypt.[100]

The flourishing Indo-Mediterranean trade brought great prosperity to the Indian coast. The annual arrival of fleets of Roman merchants with considerable sums of gold and silver to exchange for the luxuries available at the ports transformed the economies of this region. A single hoard recently found in a sand dune at Kottayam in Kerala, for example, consisted of a large brass bowl containing 8,000 gold aurei, worth some 800,000 sesterces of imperial money – a considerable fortune.*[101] The bowl may have been buried by a Roman crew who were unable to return and dig it up. If this represents a typical coin consignment for a voyage along the Golden Road to India, then it would not have taken very many Roman ships to export vast sums of bullion to India every year.[102] It was profits from this trade that were the lifeblood of these early Buddhist establishments which, by the first century bce, had come to punctuate the entire coastline.

No wonder foreigners, and especially foreign Buddhists, were welcomed with open arms at these monasteries and appear so frequently in their murals: the wealth they generated and showered on these communities was one of the driving forces that financed the growth and prosperity of the Indian Buddhist monastic movement.[103] In turn, the monks would help take the religious ideas of the Buddha, first dreamed up far inland between the Himalayas and the Ganges, out into a much wider world, west via the Red Sea to Alexandria; south to Sri Lanka; and east, from Bengal, Orissa or the Andhra coast to Suvarnabhumi, the Lands of Gold: Burma, Thailand, Java, Sumatra, Cambodia and Vietnam.[104]

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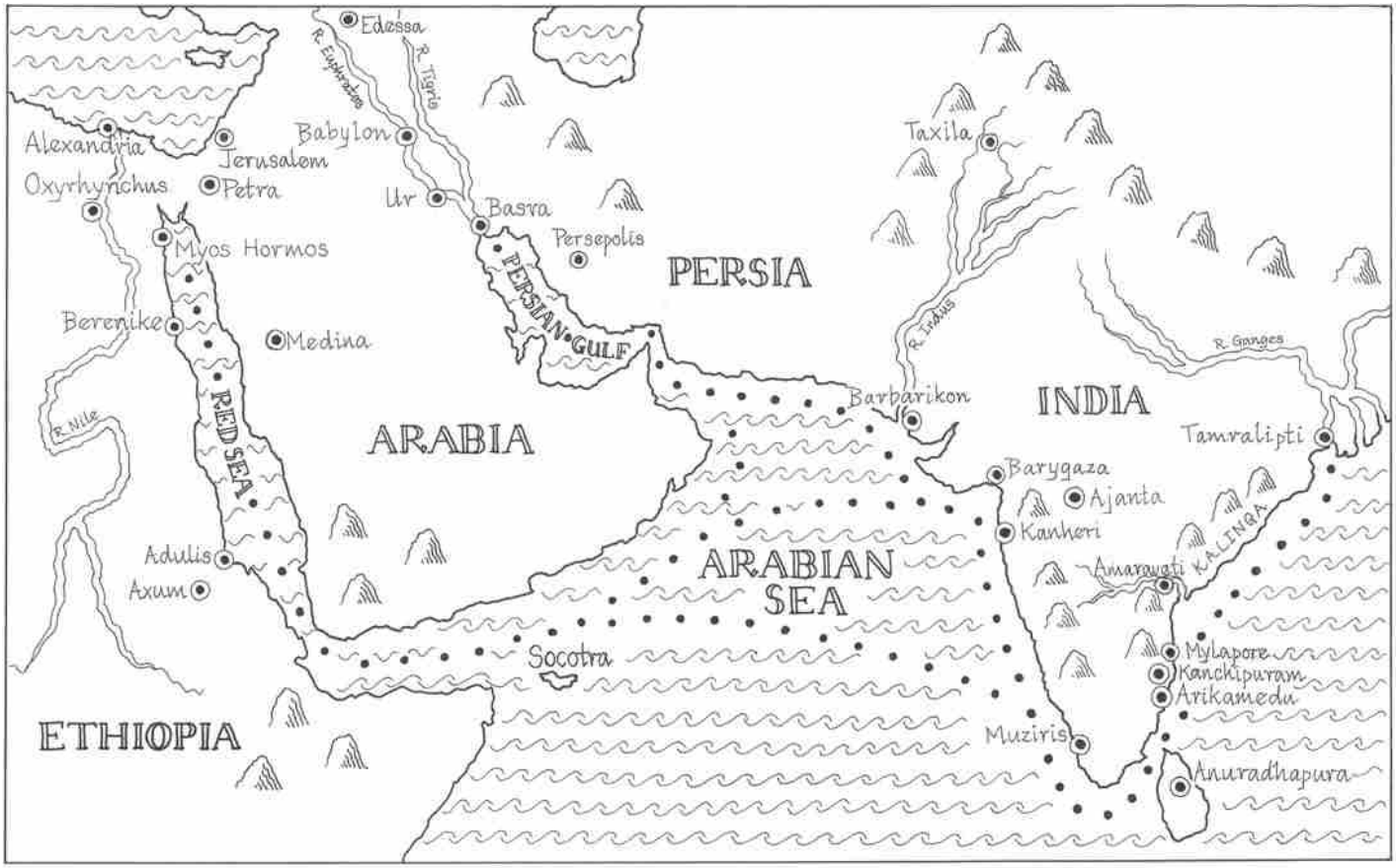
* A Roman sesterce would be worth around £1 today.


Edessa
R. Euphrates
R. Tigris
Alexandria
Jerusalem
Babylon
Oxyrhynchus
Petra
Ur
Basra
Persepolis
PERSIA
Taxila
Myos Hormos
PERSIAN GULF
Berenike
Medina
R. Indus
R. Ganges
R. Nile
RED SEA
ARABIA
Barbarikon
INDIA
Tamralipti
Barygaza
Ajanta
Kanheri
Adulis
Axum
ARABIAN SEA
Amaravati
KALINGA
Socotra
Mylapore
Kanchipuram
Arikamedu
Muziris
ETHIOPIA
Anuradhapura

India: ‘The Sink of the World’s Most Precious Metals’

2

In March 2022 a team of archaeologists was excavating a newly discovered temple of the Egyptian goddess Isis at Berenike, on the shores of the Red Sea, when they unearthed a series of remarkable finds.

Berenike is today a bleak and desolate spot. Here, under pale blue skies, the flat, treeless, red-dust wadis of the eastern desert give way to the windy shores of the Red Sea. There is little to see, and though the site contains the foundations of some once impressive structures – a couple of temples, a Roman aromatics distillery and a fine bath house – the broken walls today rarely rise far above the level of the encroaching sand dunes. Nevertheless, these unprepossessing ruins, easily missed as you drive up the Red Sea coast, were the landing point for generations of Indian merchants travelling to the Roman Empire and were once a place where unimaginable fortunes could be made.

The finds which emerged from the storeroom of the Isis temple included the head and torso of a magnificent Buddha, the first ever found to the west of Afghanistan. It was sculpted from the finest Proconnesian marble, from the island of Marmara off the Turkish coast, in a part Indo-Gandharan, part Palmyran, part Romano-Egyptian style, with rays of the sun beaming out from it on all sides, as if the Buddha had transformed into a Roman solar deity like Sol or Mithras.[1] From the style of the carving, and what the archaeologists described as the ‘tortellini-like’ curls drilled on to the Buddha’s head, they believed that the sculpture must have been made in a workshop in second-century ce Alexandria. It was probably commissioned by a wealthy Indian Buddhist sea captain in gratitude for his safe arrival in the Roman Empire. Its location in a temple of Isis may not be an accident: one Egyptian papyrus of the period refers to Isis as the mother of the Buddha.[2]

In the storerooms of the Isis temple were also found a stone memorial dedicated to a trinity of early proto-Hindu gods, one of whom, Vasudeva, with his club and discus, would soon evolve into the more familiar form of Krishna; also propitiated was Balarama, with a plough; and the goddess Ekanamsha. There was also a bilingual inscription in Greek and Sanskrit, put up in the third century by a Buddhist devotee from Gujarat: ‘In the sixth year of King Philip, [i.e. the Roman Emperor Philip the Arab, in 249 ce] the kshatriya [warrior] Vasula gave this image for the welfare and happiness of all beings.’[3]

Out of the sands of Berenike has come pottery from Spain, frankincense and resin from Southern Arabia, beads from Vietnam and Java, statues of the gods of Palmrya and cedar from Lebanon. There have also been letters, receipts and customs passes from Alexandria. But most of all there has been what the

excavator described as ‘just tons’ of Indian finds, including gems and pearls, woven mats and baskets, teak from Kerala and even the bones and skulls of elephants and monkeys – specifically, rhesus and bonnet macaques from India. Indeed a steady stream of finds from the Indian trading community had been emerging from this stretch of Egyptian desert sand for some time. A great many fragments of cotton weave have turned up in Berenike, which the archaeologists believe to be of a variety grown in Gujarat and the Indus delta.[4] A Tamil-Brahmi pottery graffito was written by a Tamil visitor who called himself ‘the chieftain Korran’, while Prakrit inscriptions recorded the visits of other south Indians. Deposits of rice, dal, coconuts, coriander and tamarind show that these south Indian merchants preferred their own deliciously peppery cuisine to that of Egypt, much as their successors still do today.[5] Nearby were found huge twenty-two-pound pots containing several thousand imported Indian black peppercorns.

Ever since the first reports of the incredible splendours and riches of India began reaching Europe after the conquests of Alexander the Great in the fourth century bce, Europeans had fantasised about the wealth of India. Here, according to Herodotus and the Greek geographers, gold was dug up by gigantic ants and guarded by griffins; here, precious jewels were said to lie scattered on the ground like dust. As the two worlds were gradually brought into regular and direct contact through the ports of the Red Sea in the first century bce, the Romans became increasingly eager consumers of Indian goods and luxuries, particularly the spices of southern India. Indian merchants were only too happy to satisfy these cravings, at considerable profit.

Archaeological evidence for the surprising intensity of contact between early India and Roman Egypt is growing fast. The Indian finds in Berenike have been mirrored by equally striking evidence of Roman trade emerging from excavations in India, particularly the recent dig near the Keralan village of Pattinam, the probable site of Berenike’s Indian counterpart, Muziris.[6] As a result, the scale and importance of this trade are currently being radically revised by scholars working on both sides of the Indian oceans. Indeed according to some recent calculations, customs taxes on trade with India may have generated as much as one-third of the entire income of the Roman exchequer.[7] One source for this striking figure is a unique papyrus document of uncertain origin believed to have been found in an ancient Egyptian rubbish dump.

The debris chucked out by the people of the now vanished Egyptian town of Oxyrhynchus – the ‘City of the Sharp-Nosed Fish’ – has for a century been providing a series of remarkable literary discoveries. These have ranged from previously unknown lesbian erotica by Sappho to fragments of the collected early Christian *Sayings of Jesus* and pieces of a new gospel, that of the apostle Thomas. The rubbish dumps first came to the attention of the outside world in 1895 when reports reached the British archaeologists Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt that the area had begun to yield an extraordinary number of papyrus fragments.

What the two men found when they visited the site, however, surpassed their wildest expectations. ‘The papyri were, as a rule, not very far from the surface,’ wrote Grenfell in the *Journal of the Egypt Exploration Fund* the following year. ‘In one patch of ground, indeed, merely turning up the soil with one’s boot would frequently disclose a layer of papyri …’ In the first year the two men found fragments of lost plays by Aeschylus and Sophocles; the earliest papyrus of St Matthew’s Gospel then known; and a leaf of a previously unknown book of New Testament Apocrypha, the Acts of Paul and Thecla. They also unearthed great quantities of historical documents such as the report of an interview between the Emperor Marcus Aurelius and an Alexandrian magistrate, as well as an entire archive of administrative correspondence and financial documents. Such was the quantity of documents unearthed that many have only recently been properly studied.[8]

A single papyrus, now in Vienna and believed by some scholars to have originated in the rubbish dumps at Oxyrhynchus, turned out to be a fragmentary loan contract and customs assessment that followed the standard template used by Alexandrian importers for such orders.[9] It was taken out by an Alexandria-based Egypto-Roman entrepreneur for the purchase of goods from an Indian merchant in faraway Muziris on the coast of Kerala. It gave precise details of one cargo that had been sent to Berenike all the way from India aboard a ship called the *Hermapollon*. What caught the attention of historians was the jaw-dropping value of the goods in question. It seems that everything that came out of India at the period was unusually expensive by the time it reached the Roman world.

The exports included nearly four tons of ivory worth seven million sesterces at a time when a soldier in the Roman army would have earned about 800 sesterces annually, and a would-be senator from the cream of the Roman aristocracy had to demonstrate assets of one million sesterces to stand for office.[10] The consignment also included a valuable shipment of eighty boxes of aromatic nard, the precious and much

prized aromatic oil of the Himalayan spikenard plant, used in the manufacture of perfume, which makes a brief appearance in the Gospel of John when Lazarus' sister Martha uses it to anoint the feet of Jesus before wiping them with her hair.[11] There was, in addition, a consignment of tortoiseshell and 790 pounds of Indian textiles, probably cotton, then considered a luxury product as valuable as silk. The total value of the 150-ton shipment was calculated at 131 talents, 'enough to purchase 2,400 acres of the best farmland in Egypt' or 'a premium estate in central Italy'.[12]

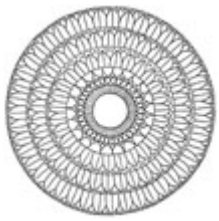
A single trading ship such as the *Hermapollon* could possibly carry several such consignments, each worth a small fortune.[13] No wonder then that Pliny the Elder (23–79 ce), the plain-speaking naval commander from northern Italy, mentions that cohorts of archers were carried on board the ships sailing to India to offer protection against pirates, and that the Muziris Papyrus carefully factors in the costs of such private security.[14] One successful shipment of this value could turn the merchants behind it into some of the richest men in the Empire.

That was not all. According to the papyrus, the import tax paid on the cargo worth almost nine million sesterces was over two million sesterces. Working up from these figures and other customs receipts from the period, scholars have estimated that by the first century ce Indian imports into Egypt were worth over a billion sesterces per annum, from which the tax authorities of the Roman Empire were creaming off no less than 270 million. These revenues surpassed those of entire subject countries: Julius Caesar imposed tribute of forty million sesterces after his conquests in Gaul while the Rhineland frontier was defended by eight legions at an annual cost of eighty-eight million.[15]

The sea trade along the Golden Road between Rome and India was clearly an immense operation, dangerous and complex, but highly profitable both to the shippers who operated the trade and to the Roman state that taxed it.[16] The implications of the unprecedented scale of the sea trade between India and Rome from the first century onwards are enormous. It is now clear that historians have been looking at entirely the wrong place when they thought about ancient trade routes.

It was India, not China, that was the greatest trading partner of the Roman Empire. It is also clear that sea travel was the fastest, most economical and safest way to move people and goods in the pre-modern world, costing about a fifth of the price of equivalent land transport. Shipping routes that cut across political and topographical boundaries were always more important than the slow-moving caravan trails, and the overland trade routes always carried much less trade than the sea roads: ships, after all, could carry vastly larger cargoes – often amounting to several hundred tons – and travel much more quickly than donkeys or camels. They could also sail around wars, instability and ambushes.

The Golden Road of early east–west commerce, in other words, lay less overland, through a Persia often at war with Rome, and much more across the open oceans, via the choppy waters of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.



There is evidence of pioneering Indian merchants making remarkable prehistoric trading voyages as early as the seventh millennium bce, when Afghan lapis first turns up in beads found in northern Syria.[17]

Sumerian clay tablets of the late second millennium bce are full of references to lapis, which is used as a simile to describe the colour of the sky and certain flowers, even the beards of men. Etched carnelian beads from Gujarat of the same date also turn up in the Royal Tombs of Ur (modern Iraq). Sumerian texts refer to a fabulously rich eastern trading city, an early Eldorado, named Aratta, which scholars have identified with one of the Indus valley cities; the same name also appears in early Sanskrit sources.[18]

Teak from Malabar, red Indian marble and ivory were reaching Ur and the young city states of ancient Mesopotamia and the wider Persian Gulf region by c.2500 bce. Some may have come overland, with the goods passed from merchant to merchant in a commercial relay race, but the larger and heavier objects such as tree trunks and large blocks of precious stone would have been much easier to move by boat. These valuable cargoes were probably rafted down the Indus, and then ferried on in the larger seagoing boats of Meluhha, as the people of the Indus Valley Civilisation are now believed to have called themselves. The

same Meluhhan boats were reaching the Persian Gulf during the reign of King Sargon of Akkad, in modern Iraq, around 2,300 bce.[19] Distinctive Indus valley cooking utensils, shell jewellery and toys which have turned up at presumed Meluhhan 'colony' sites in Mesopotamia imply that the merchants from the Indus valley were accompanied by their children and womenfolk. Some even seem to have brought their water buffaloes and zebu humped cattle to provide them with milk, while Indus valley-style gaming boards and dice indicate how these pioneering traders entertained themselves on the long hot Mesopotamian summer afternoons.[20]

Further evidence of a very early Indian merchant diaspora lies scattered around the Middle East: one cuneiform tablet mentions an entire village of Meluhhan Indians settled in what is now Iraq, while another references an Indian woman running a tavern; there is even a legal notice about a drunken Meluhhan who was fined ten silver ingots for breaking a man's tooth in a brawl.[21] Indians also worshipped at the local temples: one Meluhhan trader donated a piece of agate to the temple in Larsa, while one of his compatriots gave a wooden throne, a lapis axe and a sedan chair to the god Tishpak at his temple in central Mesopotamia.[22] Around 2000 bce, merchants from the Indus valley were sufficiently common in Babylonia for there to be a need for at least one professional translator of their language. One king of Ur, Sulgi, claimed to be able to speak the language of the Meluhhans.[23] Indian DNA also turns up in a surprising number of the bones excavated from this period in Mesopotamia.[24]

A millennium later Indians began to travel beyond the Land of the Two Rivers. Grains of Indian pepper placed up the mummified nose of the Pharaoh Rameses II in 1213 bce also presumably came by this same Red Sea route, along with the Indian diamonds used in the tools which are believed to have cut the stones of the pyramids.[25] Indian beads, silks and spices got even further – indeed as far the Aegean, where cinnamon has been found on the island of Samos.[26]

Indian sailors on the east coast of India were trading with their counterparts in South-east Asia by the second millennium bce when plant species cultivated by South-east Asian farmers start to appear in the archaeological record of South Asia. The areca nut and the coconut palm were probably introduced to South Asia around this time, together with other South-east Asian crops later regarded as quintessentially Indian such as ginger, cinnamon, sandalwood, bananas and rice.[27] Domesticated chickens and pigs may also have been imports from the south-east.[28]

By the fourth century bce there is evidence that merchants had already established a regular maritime trading network that stretched from the east coast of India across the Bay of Bengal to the small but affluent city states and cosmopolitan ports that had begun to emerge in Java, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and the South China Sea. Gold and spices, sandalwood and eaglewood, and fragrant resins such as camphor, as well as pepper and tin, were among the products which the first Indian traders came to buy. Sanskrit place names such as Takkola ('Market of Cardamum'), Karpuradvipa ('Island of Camphor'), Narikeladvipa ('Island of Coconut Palms') give us hints of the other goods that attracted Indian merchants to these ports. In return they traded the many Indian products found by modern archaeologists scattered in the early sites across the region: glass beads, bronze bowls and precious stones formed into simple jewellery, such as carnelian ornaments, some shaped into tiny tiger figurines or lions of translucent rock crystal. Around this time there is evidence of Indian glassmakers setting up workshops on the Isthmus of Kra, the narrowest point on the Thai–Malay peninsula.[29]

Around the same time, we get the first evidence of peoples from the Mediterranean world sailing eastwards to India. In 510 bce, a captain named Scylax from Caryanda, on what is now the coast of Turkey, was commissioned by the Persian Shah Darius to sail down the Kabul river, through the mouth of the Indus and hence, hugging the coastline, through the Arabian and Red seas as far as Egypt.[30]

Along the same route came the Indian gemstones, especially beryls and rubies that were used to decorate the exquisite public rooms of the great Achaemenid palace of Persepolis. One third-century bce Greek historian described how 'the gold plane-trees and the gold grape-vine under which the Persian kings commonly sat to conduct their business' were made with 'grapes of emeralds as well as of Indian rubies'. Some of these were maybe gifts from the Indian envoys who regularly brought presents to the Persian kings. The same Greek observer also spotted Indian mahouts riding the Shah's elephants, and other observers remark on Indian magicians, entertainers and cooks at work in the great Persian palaces.

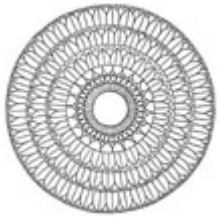
An early Buddhist Jataka tale of this period tells the story of Indian merchants in Babylon astonishing the citizens with a dancing peacock. Another early Buddhist text talks of the expansive trading world of Indian merchants stretching from 'the Lands of Gold' in South-east Asia to 'the country of the distant Greeks (and)

Alexandria (in Egypt)'.[31] It is probably this network that allowed a first-century bce Parthian craftsman sculpting a statuette of a goddess from Babylonia to use Burmese rubies to make her eyes vibrant and alive.[32]

By the third century bce, Alexander the Great's successors in Egypt, the Ptolemies, had established the ports of Berenike and Myos Hormos, initially to facilitate the import of elephants for warfare, and for the first time regular voyages down the Red Sea to and from India became feasible.[33] A now lost early Buddhist gravestone dating from the Ptolemaic era of Alexandria may once have portrayed the Buddhist icons of the *triratna* and the Wheel of the Law, the *dharmachakra*.[34] In the second century bce, Callixeinus of Rhodes reported seeing Indian women, cattle, dogs and carts full of Indian gems on display in a procession in Alexandria.[35]

According to the Greek geographer Strabo, the first European to attempt a regular commercial relationship with India was an Alexandrian merchant named Eudoxus of Cyzicus. Eudoxus was an entrepreneurial Ptolemaic Greek who went into business with an Indian sailor who had been shipwrecked on the shores of the Red Sea. Having given his new friend a lift home around 118 bce in return for directions, Eudoxus made two further trips to South Asia, bringing back a great haul of aromatics, spices and other luxuries.

He was last seen disappearing through the Pillars of Hercules, past what would become Gibraltar, with a boatload of singing boys and dancing girls, in an attempt to reach India by a new route, circumnavigating Africa via the Canary Islands. He was never heard of again.[36]



Sailings to and from India began to accelerate after sailors got the hang of using the monsoon to cross the open oceans, a feat that western authors say was first accomplished by a Greek sea captain named Hippalus in the first century bce.[37] But it was the defeat of the fleets of Cleopatra and Mark Antony by the future Emperor Augustus at the fateful sea Battle of Actium on 2 September 31 bce that changed everything.

The tragic suicides of Antony and Cleopatra in Alexandria the following year and the complete incorporation of Egypt into the Roman Empire gave Rome full possession of the rich Red Sea ports. This led to large fleets of merchant ships passing seasonally between the two worlds, giving Indian and Roman traders direct access to one another. According to Strabo, Roman control of Egypt quickly led to a sixfold increase in the shipping heading to India compared to the Ptolemaic period preceding it: 'formerly not even 20 vessels ventured to navigate the Arabian Gulf, but now large fleets are despatched.' He writes that 120 boats left for India every year from one port alone.[38] The new sea routes also brought at least three Indian embassies to Rome, two of which came from the increasingly prosperous south of the subcontinent that was now well integrated into the Roman trade network.[39]

Ancient India had a strong shipbuilding tradition, with sturdy ocean-going boats being constructed from around the second century bce. The largest of these ships had two rudders and three square-rigged masts. They were big enough to carry 1,000 passengers or 3,000 amphorae, and were more than capable of making the journey to the Red Sea or the South China Sea and back again.[40] Such ships appear on the murals at Ajanta and are minutely described in the Buddhist Jataka stories.[41]

From around this time there begin to be references to Indians among the audiences of shows and games at Alexandria and stories about an Indian raja who had come to the great Mediterranean port to sightsee and trade, and who seemingly possessed a home in the port.[42] Alexandria became the hub where goods from India and the Red Sea were received, and from where they were exported across the Mediterranean to Rome and beyond.

It was traders such as these who, from the first century, brought to Egypt the many Indian luxuries in such demand across the Roman Empire: diamonds (whose value exceeded that of gold), rubies, amethysts and onyx; banded black chalcedony and crimson-coloured sardonyx; ebony, teak, sandalwood and blood-red coral; elephant tusks, tortoiseshell, Indian cotton and Chinese silk and other rich textiles; as well as saddles and, towards the end of the Roman period, a new Asian invention – stirrups.[43] The Alexandrian

customs tariffs name other popular South Asian imports invisible to archaeologists, among them ‘painted hangings’, ‘Indian drugs’, ‘Indian hair’ and ‘Indian eunuchs’.[44]

None of these items were cheap, though few were as expensive as the Indian rock-crystal ladle on which Pliny says one wealthy Roman matron spent 150,000 sesterces or, even more extravagantly, the forty million sesterces’ worth of Indian emeralds and pearls worn by Caligula’s consort Lollia Paulina in her hair, round her neck and even on her shoes. She was so keen to prove their vast cost that she carried the receipts to show anyone who asked.[45]

In addition, the Romans imported quantities of Indian ivory mirrors, boxes and carved furniture via their Red Sea ports. From this period comes a celebrated Indian ivory figure of a voluptuously pouting courtesan or *yakshi* fertility spirit, almost naked but for a girdle holding a diaphanous wrap in place, as well as armlets and *ghungroo* dancer anklets.[46] Flanked by two attendant maids, she has long, elaborately braided and jewelled hair and was once part of a carved ivory chair or mirror handle. She was found amid the ruins of Pompeii, where there was also a shop that sold nothing but such ivory boxes, tablets and furniture: it was located close to the Porta Marina and was owned by Furius, *faber et negotiator eborarius*, a maker and seller of ivory.[47]

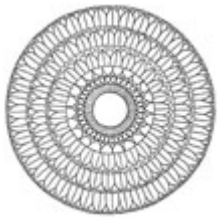
There was a demand for other exotic goods too. Rome imported sizeable numbers of wild animals to fight in the Colosseum and other Roman arenas: tigers, leopards, panthers and the occasional unruly rhinoceros. The ships which sailed the Red Sea route were unusually large, particularly the enormous elephant transports, which needed much wider harbour berths than were required by ships working the Mediterranean shipping routes.[48]

Indians also brought quantities of incense and spices: nutmeg, cloves and a cinnamon-like plant called malabathrum, whose leaves were pressed to create perfume. Above all, the Indians brought pepper, large quantities of which have been found all over Berenike in torpedo-shaped pottery jars weighing more than twenty pounds.[49]

A fortune made from the pepper trade may be behind a beautiful fourth-century mosaic filling the apse of the luxuriously appointed Roman villa in Piazza Armerina in Sicily. Here an Indian-looking goddess or yakshi tree spirit is depicted, apparently copied from an Indian original, flanked by an elephant and a tiger. She holds a cornucopia-like elephant tusk and is surrounded by black pepper vines and a tree that probably represents aromatic agarwood. Like her Indian counterparts from the period, she wears a diaphanous garment, maybe of Indian muslin – exactly the sort of see-through fashion that Pliny disapproved of. She may have represented a personification of India, put centre stage in the villa of a merchant who had made his fortune in this trade. Further up the Italian mainland can be found another relic of the fortunes made in the India trade – a gravestone carved with an image of a camel carrying amphorae of wine. This seems to be linked to the Peticii family who were important wine exporters and whose graffiti have been found in a rock shelter on the desert road leading from the Nile to Berenike.

Such was the scale of the goods traded in both directions that Indian exports reached not just the Roman elite of Italy and Sicily, but ordinary people at the far end of the Empire. One such was Gambax son of Tappo, a Roman auxiliary soldier stationed at Vindolanda on the outer fastness of the Empire at Hadrian’s Wall in Northumberland. Gambax’s writing tablet records a modest order of Indian pepper worth two denarii. This was presumably to make palatable his stodgy Romano-British dinner, something to cheer him up as he peeped over the battlements at the naked, painted, spear-waving Picts and the even wilder Caledonii beyond, shouting incomprehensible insults at the Romans from their forests and bogs.[50]

By the end of the first century, Indian pepper became almost as readily available as it is today. Eighty per cent of the 478 recipes included in the Roman cookbook of Apicius included pepper, and it appears regularly even in the pudding section. It was still, however, an expensive treat. The first-century Spanish poet Martial grumbles that the amount of pepper his cook included in his recipe for wild boar was likely eventually to bankrupt him.[51] The Tamil and Sanskrit words for sugar, ginger, pepper, sandalwood, beryl, cotton and indigo all made their way into Latin, and hence to modern English: ‘pepper’ and ‘ginger’ are both loan words from Tamil – *pipali* and *singabera* respectively.[52]



Who was sailing the boats that brought such luxuries westwards?

It remains an open question whether the bulk of the Red Sea trade was carried in shipping based and owned in Egypt or in India. By the first century ce many of the ships coming out of the Egyptian Red Sea ports were ocean-going freighters owned by Alexandrian businessmen, financiers and Graeco-Egyptian merchants. Some of these identify themselves as Jewish and at least two were wealthy widows; but there are clear hints that many of the sailors working the route were Indians skilled in the tricky art of riding the monsoon. Indeed there is more and more evidence that it was the Indians, not the Romano-Egyptians, who may have dominated the Indian Ocean trade networks, not just as sailors but as merchants and agents.[53] This is implied by the graffiti left by traders and captains from this period recently found in the Hoq caves on the island of Socotra that lies in the centre of the Red Sea, midway between Somalia and Yemen.

At the height of Indo-Roman trade, Socotra seems to have functioned as a refuelling stop, as well as a source of 'Dragon's Blood', red Indian cinnabar resin. Over the centuries many of the merchants who pulled in to take in water and food supplies carved their names into the walls and stalagmites of the caves in a variety of languages: Persian, Palmyrene Aramaic, Ethiopic Aksumite, Arabian and Nabatean. But most of the graffiti has been left by Indians, mainly Gujaratis from Barygaza (modern Bharuch): out of 219 inscriptions dating from the second to fifth century ce, 192 are written in the Indic Brahmi script and one each in Bactrian and Kharoshthi. In contrast, there are just two inscriptions in Greek and none in Latin.

They give names that are clearly and unquestionably Indian: 'Vishnu, son of the merchant Ganja', 'Skandabhuti, the Sea Captain' or the nicely laconic 'Bhadra arrived'. They appear to come from differing levels of Indian society, including Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers) and Vaishyas (farmers and merchants). There are images of stupas, Shaiva tridents, swastikas, Syrian Christian crosses and pictures of large three-masted Indian ships, as well as prayers to Krishna and Radha, invocations of the Buddha and the *triratna* symbol inscribed by a visiting Buddhist monk.[54] Even the name of the island itself derives from Sanskrit: *sukhadhara dvipa*, the 'blissful island'.

Whoever owned the ships or worked the ropes, it is certain that the trade between India and Rome grew at speed from the first century as merchants realised the scale of the profits that could be made: Pliny mentions that goods purchased in India could be sold for one hundred times the price in the Roman Empire.[55] It brought massive enrichment to Indian exporters, but at the same time some anxiety to those keeping an eye on the health of the Roman economy. As early as the reign of Nero, there seems to have been a dramatic drain of western gold to India.

The puritanical Pliny was particularly incensed by the ever-increasing drain of Roman gold into Indian pockets. He did not like the taste of the pepper and wrote that he could not understand how it had ever gained popularity at the table. 'It is quite surprising that the use of pepper has come so much into fashion,' he wrote,

> especially when you consider that in other substances which we use, it is sometimes their sweetness, and sometimes their appearance that has attracted our notice; whereas, pepper has nothing in it that can plead as a recommendation to either fruit or berry, its only desirable quality being a certain pungency; and yet it is for this that we import it all the way from India! Who, I wonder, was the first to make trial of it as an article of food?[56]

Pliny was equally unimpressed by the gemstones of which he says India was the leading exporter. In his *Naturalis Historia* he describes India as 'the sink of the world's most precious metals … There is no year which does not drain our empire of at least fifty-five million sesterces.'[57]

His near contemporary Tacitus makes a similar complaint: 'For promiscuous dress and the sake of jewels, our wealth is transported to alien and hostile countries.' In confirmation of such grumbles, two south Indian dynasties, the Pandyas and the Cheras, went as far as sending embassies to Rome to discuss the balance-of-payments problem and the inability of the Romans to pay their various Indian debts. They probably also

lobbied for trade privileges at the Roman Red Sea ports.[58] In 70 ce, the Emperor Vespasian became so worried about the eastward drain of gold that he put a temporary ban on its export.[59]

The drain of gold may have been a problem for Rome, but for India the haemorrhage of riches into its coffers only added to its already great prosperity. The early Tamil epic the *Cilappadikaram*, or 'The Tale of the Anklet', speaks proudly of the prosperous ports of the Kaveri delta:

> filled with swift and sturdy horses brought in ships; sacks of black pepper brought to the coast in carts by beast of burden; gemstones and gold yielded by the northern mountains; sandalwood and eaglewood from the western hills; pearls from the southern seas; coral from the eastern seas and gold from Java. The foods of Sri Lanka and the precious goods of Malaya. The rare and the copious were amassed in our ports.
>
> Broad streets are filled with rare and expensive goods; boats anchored along the shore like a row of tethered horses … In the harbour, the ships with flags on the masts resembled tethered elephants. In this town lived many merchants who brought in wonderful and expensive goods from other countries across the seas on large ships, and overland on carts … Along the seafront was the beautiful sight of heaps of goods; and anchored ships with their cargo … In the harbour areas were the quarters of the Westerners whose eye-catching goods were in great demand. Foreign traders who had left their native places and come here to make money, sailing their ships across dark seas, lived close to the harbour.[60]

These poetic literary descriptions have been amply confirmed by the trowel-work of archaeologists. When in the mid-1940s Sir Mortimer Wheeler first dug the ancient Tamil port of Arikamedu, ancient Poduke, in Tamil Nadu, he found so many familiar Roman finds – Romano-Egyptian glass bowls, around 540 amphorae from Italy and the eastern Mediterranean, pots from southern France, containers of garum fish sauce and olive oil from Spain – that he assumed that what he was digging was a colonial Roman trading settlement.

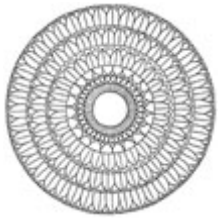
Subsequent post-colonial excavations have revealed a more complex picture. Re-examining the evidence seventy years after Wheeler's dig, new excavators concluded that Wheeler was over-emphasising the role of the Romans. For the Roman finds were greatly outnumbered by local Tamil ones, and what Wheeler had assumed to be a Roman trading colony was in fact probably a major Tamil port, full of wealthy and entrepreneurial Indian producers, shippers and merchants, which happened to number among its visitors an annual fleet of Roman merchants, as well as traders from Ethiopia and Persia.[61] Moreover, contact with the west long pre-dated the Romans, and there were significant numbers of Mediterranean finds from the Ptolemaic period, including amphorae containing wine from Rhodes and the Greek islands.[62] Among the industries which flourished in Poduke was one where Mediterranean and Indian skills came together to produce cut-price blanks for cameos and counterfeit glass beryls and terracotta lamps, both intended for export.[63]

There was also significant competition from other naval and economic powers in the region, namely the Sasanian Persians and the Ethiopians of Axum, as a revealing account of early Roman seafaring in these oceans bears witness. The first-century merchants' manual written by an Alexandria-based Graeco-Egyptian sailor, *The Periplus Maris Erythraei* or 'A Voyage Around the Indian Ocean', makes clear that the Roman traders had intense competition, especially from the Persians.[64]

This is beautifully illustrated at one of the most magnificent early Buddhist sites of the south-east coast of India, the stupa at Amaravati. Here the monks were beneficiaries of the patronage of merchants from a wide variety of countries arriving at the bustling and hugely prosperous neighbouring port of Dharanikota, a major centre of cotton exports.[65] Several of these different nationalities can still be seen in the superb fourth-century ce stupa sculptures of Amaravati, which illustrate stories from the Jataka tales with images of, among others, elegant courtly black African envoys clothed in tight-fitting tunics. These figures presumably show ambassadors from the Ethiopian court at Axum, and they are depicted bowing before the Raja and handing him rich gifts and boxes of their produce as the palace women crowd around in rapt excitement. As if to confirm links with India, a large hoard of Kushan coins minted by a first-century Indian king was recently discovered in a monastery in the highlands of Ethiopia.[66]

Although Arikamedu may not have been the Roman trading colony Wheeler believed it to be, excavations at both Poduke/Arikamedu and its west-coast counterpart, Pattanam/Muziris in Kerala, have more than confirmed the importance and scale of trade between Rome and south India at this time. Both sites were found to be packed full of Roman amphorae: 6,000 such sherds from Italy and Syria recently turned up in

excavations in Pattanam, along with 1,600 sherds of Roman glass and many other Mediterranean artefacts, such as imperial Romano-Egyptian pottery, fragments of textiles from Egypt, Roman gaming counters, silverware and even statues.[67] This reflects the observation by the second-century Alexandrian geographer Ptolemy that the now vanished port of Muziris was 'packed with Greek ships'.[68]



As ever, ideas and philosophies travelled along with the merchants, their gold and and their goods.

As the Berenike excavations show, Buddhist monks and pious Hindus travelled westwards, where local craftsmen in the ports of Egypt clearly understood the basic concepts of Indian iconography and were able to carve good Brahmi in excellent Sanskrit. Nevertheless signs of productive cultural interaction and religious conversion seem to have been fairly limited. As well as references to Yavana patrons of Buddhist monasteries in India, there are literary references to Buddhists in Egypt and Palestine. The memory of one of Ashoka's missions to Egypt may be preserved in the demotic Egyptian story 'The Swallow and the Sea', which tells of a Prince Ausky who wrote to Pharoah from the east, and which has close parallels with one of the Sanskrit *Panchatantra* stories, 'The Plovers'. Indeed an accountant named in one of the Oxyrhynchus papyri from middle Egypt has the name Ashoka.[69] Some of Aesop's Fables seem to owe their origin to Buddhist Jataka stories, as did the popular early Christian work *The Tale of Barlaam and Josaphat*.[70]

Some scholars have suggested that the Buddhist monastic movement which flourished in India from the third century bce could have had some influence on both the Jewish Essenes in the deserts of Judaea, just above the Red Sea, and on the Christian monks who came to dominate the deserts of the Middle East in late antiquity. Egypt, the landing place of Indians heading westwards, was after all where Christian monasticism began. St Antony, traditionally regarded as the first Christian monk, and the founder of the Christian monastic movement, was born in Alexandria and when he began his flight to the desert he retreated to a cave near the Red Sea, not long after the Berenike Buddha was put to worship in the Isis temple further down the coast. Both Alexandria and the shores of the Red Sea were areas where the presence of Buddhist monks was clearly not uncommon: we know from one of his inscriptions that Ashoka sent his missionaries as far as Cyrene, modern Libya, around 250 bce. Some link between the two now seems far from improbable.[71] The idea of a Devil, absent in early Judaism, may also owe its origins to ideas circulating in Buddhist or Manichaean cosmology.

In reverse, just as Buddhism may have put down some tenuous roots in Egypt, so there is evidence that Mediterranean religions established a foothold in India. A Temple of Augustus at Muziris in Kerala is clearly depicted on a late antique map of India, the c.300 CE *Tabula Peutingeriana*, known from a medieval copy now in the Vatican Library.[72] Moreover in modern Kerala an entire community of indigenous Christians firmly maintain that Jesus' disciple St Thomas – the apostle of Jesus who famously refused to believe in the resurrection 'until I have placed my hands in the holes left by the nails and the wound left by the spear' – sailed to India from Palestine in the first century ce, and that he baptised their ancestors. This is not a modern tradition: it has been the firm conviction of the Christian community there at least since it was first recorded in a Gnostic Christian text the Acts of Thomas, probably written around 250 ce in Edessa, now in eastern Turkey.[73]

This tradition maintained that St Thomas was actually Jesus' twin (the Syriac for Thomas – Te'oma – means twin, as does his Greek name Didymos); like his brother he was a carpenter from Galilee. After Jesus' death, according to the Acts, the apostles cast lots to decide their different mission fields and Thomas was assigned India. The apostle was horrified. 'I am a Hebrew,' he replied. 'How can I go amongst Indians and preach the truth?' But, according to the Acts, the Risen Christ appeared to him 'in a vision of the night' and ordered his twin to go. 'The Saviour said to him, Fear not, Thomas, go to India and preach the word there for my grace is with you.' Still Thomas resisted. 'Wherever you wish to send me, send me,' he replied. 'But please somewhere else. I will not go to the Indians.' But Jesus was not in a mood to be contradicted, even by his twin. He sold the reluctant apostle as a slave to an envoy of 'Gondophares, King of the Indians', who wished to make use of his skills as a carpenter to build him a palace. Thomas was duly shipped to India, via

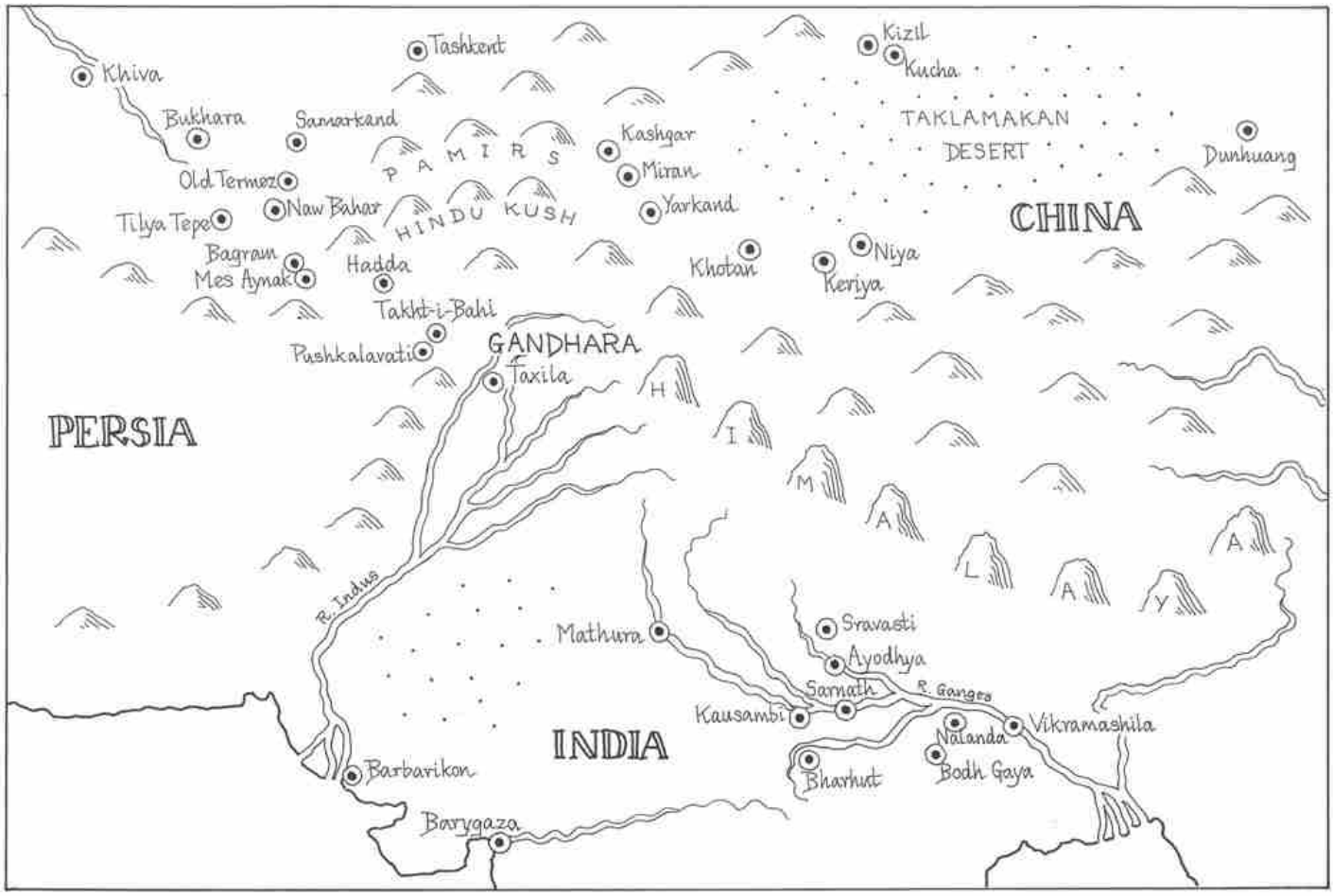
Socotra.[74] The Acts imply that slaves were a common export from Rome to India, and the text also mentions 'a Hebrew slave woman' who was part of the musical entertainment at a marriage feast.[75]

According to tradition, he arrived in 52 ce, at a time when a king named Gondophares was indeed ruling from Taxila. If a Jewish carpenter named Thomas really did make it to India, as tradition maintains, he would probably have been regarded as yet another Yavana craftsman, of the sort frequently noted in early Sangam Tamil poetry. Indian Christian tradition maintains that he founded seven churches across southern India before he was martyred by 'jealous Brahmins' in 68 ce, in Mylapore near modern Chennai.[76]

Whether or not there is any historical truth in the legends of St Thomas, early Christian missionaries were certainly active in southern India. The early Church historians Eusebius (260–339 ce) and Jerome (c.342–420 ce), both writing in Palestine, record the visit to Alexandria in 180 ce of a delegation of Indian Christians who asked to be sent a bishop. The Patriarch despatched a teacher, the Stoic philosopher Pantaenus, who found a flourishing Christian community waiting for him on the Indian coast. A century later, another Christian from the Levant, Bishop David of Basra, is recorded as having been sent to serve among the Indian Christians. The memoir of a Nestorian Christian voyager from Egypt, written in the mid-sixth century during the reign of the Emperor Justinian, *The Christian Topography of Cosmas Indicopleustes*, records well-established Christian communities along the length of the Kerala coastline (Male), around Mumbai (Kalliena) and in Sri Lanka (Dioskourides). He also states that these communities were administered by priests from the Sasanian Church of the East, which followed Cosmas' own Nestorian beliefs.[77]

Indeed, the legend that the Indian Christian community was founded by St Thomas was soon well known around the Christian world. St Ephrem was writing hymns about St Thomas's visit to India in fourth-century Mesopotamia.[78] Around 400 ce, Gaudenius of Brescia in Italy claimed in a sermon that his church held relics of St Thomas, who had been martyred in India. In 594 ce, the chronicler Gregory of Tours met a Greek monk, Theodorus, who reported that in India he had encountered Christians who had told him about St Thomas's missionary journey and who had shown him the 'spectacularly large' tomb of the apostle, with its own monastery church. He also talked of a monastery at the site that looked after 'an eternal flame', which still burned at the site of this martyrdom.[79] Over the centuries to come, almost every western traveller to southern India, from Marco Polo to the first Portuguese conquistadors, reported the same story.

The legend of St Thomas eventually led to the first ever recorded journey to India by an Englishman: according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, in 883 King Alfred (he of the burned cakes) sent Bishop Sigehelm of Sherborne 'to St Thomas in India'; years later the Bishop returned, carrying with him 'precious stones and the odiferous essences of that country'. The twelfth-century chronicler William of Malmesbury records that the 'gems of exotic splendour' that Sigehelm brought back from India could still be seen at Sherborne 400 years later.[80]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Dunhuang
PAMIRS
Kashgar
Miran
Old Termez
Naw Bahar
HINDU KUSH
Yarkand
CHINA
Tilya Tepe
Bagram
Mes Aynak
Hadda
Khotan
Niya
Keriya
Takht-i-Bahi
GANDHARA
Pushkalavati
Taxila
PERSIA
H
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M
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R. Indus
Mathura
Sravasti
Ayodhya
Sarnath
R. Ganges
Kausambi
INDIA
Nalanda
Vikramashila
Barbarikon
Bharhut
Bodh Gaya
Barygaza

The Great King, King of Kings, Son of God

3

On a high, bright, cloudless day in spring, a little before Afghanistan fell back into the hands of the Taliban, I drove out of Kabul with a party of French archaeologists.

We headed first through stripfields, green with ripening barley, past a series of fortified mudbrick compounds, each surrounded by a windbreak of tall, straight poplars. It was April, and the higher slopes in the distance were still etched with drifts of snow.

After an hour driving deeper into the badlands of Logar, we turned off the road on to a rough mud track. Here we were waved through a succession of Afghan army checkpoints manned by teenage recruits in ragged camouflage. We then lurched steeply onward uphill, through camel-coloured foothills which in turn rose to a bleak, snowbound, high-altitude plateau. Then we crested a rise. The crumbling mudbrick remains of the ancient Buddhist monastery of Mes Aynak rose out of the drifts around us. The ruins stood out against the snowfields, their sharp edges eroded by 2,000 years of winter rains.

Mes Aynak is a remote site, even by Afghan standards. Bin Laden used the caves at the bottom of the valley to train the men who carried out the 9/11 attacks, and by the time the excavations were in full swing the shadowy Taliban had returned and had begun leaving deadly IEDs along the road, demanding protection money. But the archaeologists carried on regardless because of the importance of the site and the imminent threat to its existence. This was due not to the Taliban themselves but to the Chinese state mining company which had bought the valley from the Afghan government and planned to turn it into the world's second-largest open-cast copper mine.

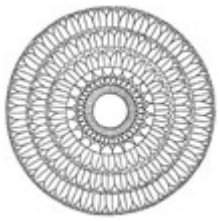
Overlooking the bleak slopes of the Koh Baba Wali, the monastic ruins of Mes Aynak lay in a very different world to the shoreside port temples of Berenike. Yet many of the finds the archaeologists dug up were oddly similar. Here, again, daring, ambitious Indian merchants lay at the vanguard of an important moment of cultural and civilisational diffusion. Powered by the proceeds of the copper mine that the monks managed and apparently worked for profit, the Buddhist enclave of Mes Aynak was a major centre of early Indic culture, from which Indian ideas, religion, art, philosophy and learning had spread out across the Hindu Kush.

As they dug down, the diggers found three separate monasteries and two large stupas, thirty feet in height, lined with Roman-looking Corinthian columns. Ranks of fragile, headless stucco Buddhas, meditating in the lotus position, faced the stupas, while on one side they found a reclining Buddha Shakyamuni twenty-five feet long.

In the lines of small chapels facing the stupa there were red-painted statues in wood and clay so well preserved that it felt as if the earth here had somehow lost its powers of decay. In one, a dreadlocked Brahmin ascetic with a goatee beard faced a wide-eyed woman with a centre parting, dressed in a red sari and a blue shawl, which she wore off the shoulder, so revealing the line of small gold medallions which glittered around her neck. In another chapel was an image of the child-devouring nature spirit Panchika, whom the Buddha converted to his faith, and who soon became the Buddhist patron saint of both children and fertility. Some of the images were derived from Tales of the Buddha, others from Jataka tales of the Buddha's earlier lives, others still from popular stories of the *yaksha* tree spirits, all of which were first conceived on the banks of the Ganges and Yamuna, but which now found themselves taking solid form in wood, stone and terracotta, many hundreds of miles to the north.[1] Amid all these Buddhist remains lay a single chapel dedicated to the Hindu goddess Durga, whom the Buddhist monks here seem to have venerated with almost as much reverence as they did any of their stupas.[2]

The objects found at Mes Aynak are not just striking evidence of a strong Indic presence in a region that for much of its history has been dominated by its links with the Persianate and Islamic world to its west. They also hint how important Mes Aynak had been as a staging point for one of the most important and surprising moments of cultural transformation in history.

For throughout the early centuries ce Mes Aynak was a major rest stop for lonely caravans of Indian traders and Buddhist missionaries heading up the Indus through the mountains towards China, and so was an important base for the northwards diffusion of Indian religion, culture and philosophy. It would also have been a welcome refuge for exhausted Chinese monks heading the other way on the final leg of their pilgrimage to the Buddhist holy places of India. Many such monks were making for the great Buddhist monastery universities of Taxila and later of Vikramashila and Nalanda, the latter famous for its extensive library, the finest east of Alexandria.



How had such an apparently remote site on the edge of the Hindu Kush amassed the resources to become a major centre of learning and culture?

The answer is connected to the rise of a mysterious dynasty which created one of the great empires of antiquity but which is still one of the least known and most enigmatic. If this dynasty ever created a body of written literature, it has all apparently disappeared, and there are no surviving references to it in the Indian historical tradition except for three names preserved in a single chronicle from Kashmir.[3] All we know comes from random finds of coins, inscriptions and sculpture, of which there is a great deal, along with the odd fortification and ruined shrine, as well as from the occasional cryptic reference to the dynasty in the correspondence of its Chinese neighbours.[4]

The Kushans were originally a group of pastoral Indo-European nomads who moved between the desert oases of eastern Central Asia. The early Chinese empires to their east initially knew them as the Yuezhi. Their self-portraits on their coins and in their sculpture show large-framed men of apparently Iranian stock. They are depicted standing assertively, their elbows out, with wide-open eyes, cavalier moustaches, thick, straggling beards and prominent noses. They wear long, belted caftans, baggy Parthian-style shalwar trousers and knee-length, padded riding boots.[5]

Some time around 160 bce, the Yuezhi/Kushans moved, or were driven by the expanding Han Chinese Empire, south into what is now Afghanistan. Here they eventually overwhelmed the last of the Bactrian Greeks, the descendants of the Macedonians effectively left stranded in Afghanistan by the premature death of Alexander the Great and the fracturing of his empire. According to one Chinese historian, the Yuezhi plundered the Greek cities, but made a point of leaving the irrigation systems intact, taking charge of their well-watered fields.[6] They also defeated other groups of invading nomads who pass like fleeting shadows through the stratigraphy of the archaeological record: the Sakas or Indo-Scythians and the Indo-Parthians.

A first glimpse of the world of the Kushans at this early period is given by the contents of the richly appointed burial mounds at Tilya Tepe, the 'Golden Hill', in northern Afghanistan.[7] One commemorated an

entombed chieftain or prince. He was surrounded by several consorts, presumably his queens. One of these had had her skull deformed at birth, and all may have been killed on the death of their Chief. What distinguished the women was the immense riches they displayed: quantities of superb Scythian-style nomad jewellery, plaques and boot buckles decorated with dragons pulling carriages; nearby lay gold crowns and dagger sheaths of gold and lapis lazuli. These were decorated with wild and powerful tribal designs, alive with fearsome rearing, coiling and biting panthers and dragons, some converging on human figures named by archaeologists the 'Dragon Master', the 'Master of Divine Horses' and the 'Mistress of Animals'. These exquisite pieces speak of the warrior world of the nomadic steppe.[8]

But alongside these pieces, one queen in particular was opulently attired with objects of Greek inspiration. She held a Parthian coin with a Greek inscription and her earrings were crafted as winged images of Eros. On her gold ring was carved the head of a young Apollo and around her neck were two clasps showing images of Ariadne and the triumph of Dionysos. Beside her lay a Mediterranean perfume flask. Hanging from her crown were gold discs, while a tiny image of a winged, near-naked Aphrodite flew amid a cloud of gold spangles on her chest. In her mouth was a silver coin with a Greek inscription, counterstruck with the head of an Indo-Greek king – reflecting, presumably, the Greek idea of leaving a fee for the ferryman, Charon, to carry her spirit across the Styx. The obvious deduction was that before her death the princess had requested a burial that reflected her Greek heritage.[9]

Among the other burials at the site were found expensive imported Chinese, Achaemenid Persian and Roman artefacts as well as images of the Greek gods Athena and Ariadne and cupids riding a dolphin. These pieces suggest a different picture from the Scythian animal ornament adorning the Chief: they give an impression of the Kushans as a more settled people who had begun turning their backs on their nomadic ways and were becoming involved with international trade. They also reveal the Kushans showing an interest in urban refinement and far-flung artistic, religious and philosophical ideas, mixing together religions and philosophies from Greece, Rome and Persia with those of India.[10]

Over time, the Kushans left their tribal Scythian and nomadic roots behind them and adopted some aspects of the settled Hellenism of their Bactrian Greek predecessors, whose coins they soon began to imitate. They also imitated many of the ways of the Parthians who controlled the plains of Persia to the west.[11] In this fashion they embraced an unexpectedly wide range of the deities – more than thirty appear on their coins – drawn from the diverse religions of their new domains. The further the Kushans penetrated southwards, the more they focused their public devotions on the many deities, religions and philosophies of India.[12]

Paradoxically, the rise of Indian Buddhism in Central Asia seems to have begun precisely at a time when the Kushan armies were marching in from the north and heading southwards towards India. Counter-intuitively, the conquests of the Kushans opened the once locked passes of the Hindu Kush, and in time Buddhist monks would head from India up over the Hindu Kush, building small shrines, stupas and monasteries and beginning to convert the local peoples to their faith. Eventually it would be the patronage of Buddhism that took place during the Kushan period that would allow the faith to spread through Central Asia into China.[13]

According to tradition, Buddhism was first brought to Central Asia by Trapusa and Bhallika, the two merchants who first offered food to the Buddha after his Enlightenment. Whether or not this was actually the case, Buddhism was probably present in Afghanistan and Kashmir from the mid-third century bce when Ashoka sent his missionaries into the region; but it was initially a minority interest, and just one of a number of religious systems present in the area. The Greeks who controlled Bactria before the Kushans largely continued worshipping their own gods, their faith in Hellenistic deities apparently being an important part of their diasporic identity. Relatively few seem to have converted to Buddhism.[14] These few included, in around 150 bce, the 'Meridarch Theodotos' whose allegiance to the philosophy of 'Lord Shakyamuni' is recorded on a Buddhist reliquary inscription found in the jagged mountains of Bajaur, on the modern Afghan–Pakistan border.[15]

There was also a king named Menander, or Milinda, who ruled the area around Peshawar about 75 bce, and whose philosophical debates with a Buddhist monk named Nagasena are recorded in an early Buddhist narrative named the *Milindapanha*, or 'Milinda's Questions'.[16] In early versions of the text, Menander was sufficiently impressed by Nagasena's reasoning to donate to the monk an expensive shawl and to order the distribution of 800 meals to Nagasena's community. As so often, the tale grew in the telling: later versions of the *Milindapanha* have Menander dramatically giving up his throne, embracing Buddhism and becoming,

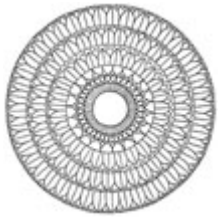
like Ashoka before him, a Buddhist lay follower.[17]

These two rulers apart, there is hardly any sign of interaction between the Greeks and their Buddhist subjects. Indo-Greek and Bactrian coins invariably show images of Herakles/Hercules, Athena, Zeus and other Greek gods, and do not bear any Buddhist symbols; nor do we have any Buddhist texts being translated into Greek.

It was only when the Kushans took control of the passes of the Hindu Kush in the first and second centuries ce and began opening up a wide-ranging trade across the mountains from Tajikistan, right down to the Indus port of Barbarikon on the coast of Sindh, not far from modern Karachi, that Indian Buddhist merchants began settling in the area in numbers.[18] The faith particularly came to flourish in Gandhara, in the mountains and valleys around Peshawar and in the Khyber Pass, where the grey snowmelt of the Swat and Kabul rivers surges down towards the Indus. Many of the monks and merchants seem to have travelled here by river, which was less dangerous and expensive than travelling overland: almost all the monasteries they founded were built along the banks of the Indus river and its tributaries.[19]

At this period Kushan Buddhist activity was probably centred on the major university town of Taxila, which according to several Jataka stories had become a centre of higher Buddhist studies.[20] The area became prosperous enough to fund the foundation of major Buddhist monasteries at Mes Aynak, Hadda near Jalalabad, Naw Bahar near Balkh and Takht-i-Bahi near Peshawar.

Eventually, Kabul would come to be ringed by no fewer than forty Buddhist monasteries and stupas. A later visitor described one of these in a tone of wonder. Its beauty was comparable to that of springtime, he wrote. ‘The pavement was made of onyx, the walls of pure marble; the door was made from moulded gold, while the floor was solid silver; stars were represented everywhere one looked … in the hallway, there was a golden idol as beautiful as the moon, seated on a magnificent, bejewelled throne.’[21]



The leader who consolidated Kushan control of Afghanistan was named Kujula Kadphises (r.c.40–90 ce). He first appears as a young prince at the court of the Indo-Parthian ruler Gondophares, the monarch said in the *Acts of Thomas* to have invited the apostle to India.[22] On the death of Gondophares, Kujula Kadphises united the Kushan confederacy and seized control of the rich lands between Kabul and Peshawar, eliminating several rival Kushan princes.[23]

These conquests opened up a route for future Kushan kings to march southwards into the prosperous plains of India, and from the beginning of his reign the growing influence of India is clear: it was probably Kujula Kadphises who minted the first coin with a Buddhist inscription, reading in Greek and Kharoshthi *satya dharmasthita*, ‘Steadfast in the Pursuit of Truth and the True Law’. Possibly influenced by his Indian subjects, or as part of a charm campaign to win them over, or maybe just giving a new iconography to a god he already worshipped, Kujula also covered a number of his coins with some of the very earliest images of what looks like Lord Shiva, leaning against his bull Nandi and holding an ascetic’s waterpot. He also holds a trident that some scholars believe was borrowed from the imagery of the Greek gods Herakles/Hercules and Poseidon, and which had appeared in their hands on the coins of the preceding Bactrian Greeks. Kujula’s coins also show his awareness of the importance of transcontinental trade and he introduced a series of new coins modelled on the silver denarius of Augustus. The near identical weight, and so value, of Roman and Kushan coins was presumably intended to ease trade between the two empires.[24]

Kujula Kadphises was more than eighty when he died.[25] He was succeeded by his son Vima Takhto (r.c.90–102 ce), who continued the campaign of conquest south-eastwards deep into India, eventually taking into his empire the crucial economic, religious, artistic and cultural capital of Mathura, to the south of modern Delhi. This city, rich on the profits of the cotton trade, became an early religious centre dotted with extravagant monuments to a variety of deities and religious systems.[26] Mathura was already celebrated in the *Mahabharata* as the birthplace of Krishna and the seat of his Yadava clan.[27] Here Vima’s colossal headless statue can still be seen, sitting regally on a lion throne.[28]

Under Vima Takhto's son, Vima Kadphises (102–127 ce), the royal devotion to the growing cult of Shiva became clearer, although Vima continued to patronise Buddhism and is named in an early manuscript as donor to a Gandharan monastery.[29] At the dynastic family shrine that he built in Mathura, elevating his dynasty almost to the status of gods on the Persian model, an inscription describes Vima as 'steadfast in the true law, on whom, on account of his devotion, the Kingdom was conferred by Shiva'.[30] On his coins he is shown standing and sacrificing at an altar, while flames billow Mithra-like from his head and shoulders; on the reverse is the naked figure of Shiva with an erect phallus, holding a Shaivite trident–battle axe, and with an animal skin draped over his left arm and a waterpot in his right hand. Here the inscription reads unambiguously 'the devout worshipper of Shiva, Maheshvara, the lord of all the world, the great lord'.[31]

At the northern end of his empire, Vima Kadphises also commissioned an image of Shiva and his wife Parvati in the vestibule of a shrine at Dilberjin in northern Afghanistan, redirecting reverence from the Greek Dioscuri who had previously been worshipped there and extending the worship of Hindu gods far to the north of their usual territories.[32] The conquest of Indian territory thus enabled a massive cultural, religious and iconographical flow northwards through Afghanistan into Bactria, with Indian ideas and religious practices being transmitted ever further north and eastwards into what is now Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Xinjiang.[33] By the third century ce there are references to a monastery known as Dramilavihara, or the 'Tamil Monastery', in Old Termez, today in southern Uzbekistan.[34]

It was also Vima Kadphises who took the crucial step of further developing relations with Rome and especially Roman Egypt, which was now in direct maritime contact with the rich port of Barbarikon at the mouth of the Indus. In 107 ce Vima sent envoys to the Emperor Trajan in Rome: the ambassadors are depicted on Trajan's Column, dressed in turbans and trousers, attending the 123-day-long victory events held to celebrate Trajan's victory over the Dacians; other 'Indian' ambassadors were turning up in Rome and Byzantium as late as the rule of Julian (r.361–3) and Justinian (r.527–65).[35] Following a Roman promise to pay the Kushans in gold for their purchases, Vima began minting coins modelled on the standard Roman gold coins of Augustus and probably recycled from Roman originals that had been melted down. These were the first gold coins ever minted in India and, weighing at a quarter of a troy ounce slightly more than the original Roman *aureus*, reflected the Kushans' ever-growing trade surplus with the Mediterranean world and the amount of Roman gold now making its way into Kushan lands.[36]

From the Kushan ports, a wealth of Roman gold and wine and other western luxury goods from Alexandria and the Red Sea ports were now beginning to move from Barbarikon, punted up the Indus towards Central Asia and the northern Kushan capitals of Taxila, Pushkalavati near Peshawar and Bagram on the Shomali plains to the north of Kabul. An entire wine cellar full of Roman amphorae has turned up in Pushkalavati – lying, perhaps surprisingly, immediately adjacent to a Buddhist shrine.[37]

Along with the luxury goods came new ideas, and new gods. Newly imported Ptolemaic and Romano-Egyptian gods such as Serapis, the principal god of Alexandria, now begin to appear on Kushan coins, confirming the strong Red Sea trade links with Egypt.[38] The nursing Isis appears transformed in the sculpture of the period into the Buddhist *yakshi*, Hariti.[39] But the most dramatic evidence of wealth and refined, cosmopolitan tastes generated by this trade comes from two walled-up chambers in what was probably once a merchant's storeroom, dating from 50 to 125 ce. It was dramatically uncovered by French archaeologists between 1936 and 1940, near to what later became the US military base at Bagram airfield.

Here were found delicate ivory plaques, figurines and carved furniture in a style reminiscent of the sculpture of Sanchi in central India showing courtly scenes of palace women, dancers, musicians and near-naked fertility figures standing seductively under arches. There are fragments of ornate lacquered tableware from Han China. But the most spectacular were the finds imported from Roman Egypt: bronze figurines of another Ptolemaic Egyptian deity Harpocrates, the son of Isis and Horus, in a long robe, finger on his lips; superbly coloured Egyptian glassware including delicate fish-shaped perfume flasks, blown-glass bowls and beakers, pear-shaped jugs and pitchers of the deepest purple.[40]

Most remarkable of all are the cut-glass goblets painted with images of fishing, hunting and the date harvest, as well as a unique representation of the Pharos lighthouse at Alexandria, topped with the colossal statue of Poseidon and his trident.[41] Other goblets depict Roman gladiators and a battle scene from the life of Alexander the Great.[42] There is also a superb bowl made from the most expensive stone in the Roman world – purple imperial porphyry which could only be found in a single quarry, Mons Porphyrites in Roman Egypt, and which was usually reserved for imperial portraits and sarcophagi.[43]

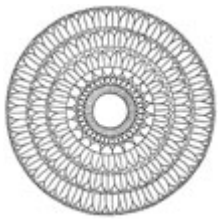
The Bagram treasure is a dramatic illustration of the new purchasing power of the Kushan elite of the

first century ce. Behind it lies the remarkable flourishing of the Kushans' international trade and their place as a prosperous new hub of the global economy. The Kushan aristocracy, who had now fully embraced Buddhism, were quick to use this wealth to support the building of monasteries with large, square-based, elegantly domed stupas, lined with Corinthian columns echoing those of Rome.

Here they supported the patronage of Buddhist literature and the carving of superb and increasingly colossal Buddhist sculptures that reflected their cosmopolitan tastes. Gilded statues, jewels, silk and incense gifted to the monks by pious pilgrims were amassed in the new Buddhist religious complexes. These gave them a sense of both permanence and magnificence, further encouraging the Buddhist caravan traders, who could make their expeditions knowing that they would find security at the fortified monasteries which now dotted the trade routes. The monasteries provided other services too, becoming rich by reprovisioning merchants, translating documents and lending money. The caves along these caravan routes honeycombed ever deeper into the rock, so as to accommodate the fast-growing monastic communities.[44]

As trade with Rome continued to filter in through the Kushans' new ports and upriver to the Karakoram valleys, Indic religious ideas, both Buddhist and Hindu, began to be expressed in hybrid sculpture that took on an increasingly classical Roman form, inspired by the importation of a variety of Roman decorative arts.[45]

Of nowhere is this more true than the region of Gandhara.



It was at this period, under the patronage of the Kushans, that the Buddha first began to be depicted on a monumental scale in human form – a radical change at the time, and one that for ever transformed Buddhist art.

Before the arrival of the Kushans, the Buddha was almost never depicted directly, but instead only in aniconic form through widely understood symbols of his presence such as an empty throne, a tree, a turban, a flaming pillar or a pair of footprints. It was as though it would be thought inauspicious and disrespectful to imprison him again in human form after he had escaped with such effort from his mortal coil. This is the way he is shown in the earliest phases of the oldest Buddhist sites such as Bodh Gaya, Mathura, Bharhut and Sanchi.

In the early first century this changed, and soon large numbers of Buddha images were being sculpted both as a focus for the devotion of the Buddhist faithful and as a source of merit for the patrons. This change to iconic, figural religious art took place in the same region that had just embraced the public use of the Kushan king's image on coins and in sculpture. But exactly where and how this happened is still a matter of fierce debate.[46]

It is quite possible, even probable, that the development first took place in the constantly innovative Indian religious centre of Mathura.[47] Here cults of *yaksha* tree spirits had already found expression in freestanding monumental stone sculptures, which begin to appear from the third century bce. One of the most spectacular of these is the great *yaksha* from Parkham near Mathura, dated to 275 bce, sometimes said to be the oldest freestanding statue in Indian religious art. Like other *yakshas* of the period, it is built as if to resemble a massively robust heavyweight wrestler or a well-fed nightclub bouncer, and carries attributes of wealth (such as bags of coins), health (in this case, a flask of medicine) and protection (swords or clubs). These *yakshas*, which are sometimes seven or eight feet tall, are images of extraordinary strength and power.[48]

With the rise of Buddhism, these *yakshas* cross faiths and are recruited as door guardians in Buddhist shrines, tamed spirit deities brought into the Buddhist fold as guardians of monasteries and stupas. The inscriptions proclaim the Buddhists' success in converting these fierce spirits to be guardians of the *dharma*.[49]

A few generations later, these *yakshas* form the model for the first standing Buddhas carved at Mathura in mottled red sandstone. We even know the names of the religious leaders who commissioned them, as they left inscriptions identifying themselves as pioneers of this new innovation. 'The learned nun Buddhamitra

and [her teacher] the monk Bhikshu Bala who knew the three Pitakas [scriptures]' left their names on three separate Buddha images that they had made in Mathura around 130 ce. These they then had distributed to Buddhist communities over the length and breadth of the Gangetic plains in the important pilgrimage centres of Sarnath, Kausambi and Sravasti 'where the Lord Buddha used to walk, on his promenade … with the object of averting all unhappiness'. Bala also writes that he did this at his own expense and that he later provided one of his statues with a stone umbrella. Thirty years later, the nun Buddhamitra's niece, another nun named Dhanavati, donated a fourth Buddha which she 'caused to be set up' at Mathura. The inscriptions mean we have a remarkable insight into the small cast of characters who seem to have been directly responsible for one of the most radical and far-reaching moments of innovation in the history of Buddhist art.

Bala and Buddhamitra's early standing Buddhas are clearly modelled on earlier monumental *yaksha* images and images of the warrior kings of the day, and like them they are massive – more than eleven feet tall – and all three are robust and muscular. They share with the burly *yakshas* that precede them their wide-open eyes, broad shoulders, powerful arms, Sumo tummies and large powerful chests. They are altogether different figures from the later images of the sensitive meditating Buddha, cross-legged and eyes downcast, with which we are familiar, although they have many features that will long linger in Buddhist art, including their close-clinging robes, wrapped to expose the right shoulder.[50]

But while Mathura has the most convincing claim to have produced the earliest indigenous freestanding Buddha statues, there is also good evidence to show that it was contact with classical Roman imports that inspired the development of the Buddha image further north, in Gandhara. This only accelerated after Augustus' conquest of Egypt and the arrival of the Red Sea merchant fleet at the port marking the mouth of the Indus, Barbarikon.

Certainly, the oldest iconic image of the human Buddha yet found is from Hellenistic Afghanistan, not Mathura. Among the Kushan burials at Tilya Tepe was found a very early gold medallion of the Buddha in the form of a bearded man, depicted in the likeness of Zeus or Herakles, standing and pushing an eight-spoked wheel; the accompanying Kharoshthi inscription echoes the ideas of the Buddha's first sermon and reads: *Dharmachakra pravartako*, 'He Who Sets in Motion the Wheel of Law'. This very early image, dated to between the first century bce and the first century ce, is unique in its iconography and has no direct parallel in the Buddhist art that followed.[51]

After the Battle of Actium in 31 bce had opened up the annual monsoon-driven sea trade route between Roman Egypt and India, Buddhist artists in Gandhara began producing increasingly Roman-looking artworks. These include the beautiful Bimaran reliquary, probably the work of a jeweller in Pushkalavati, the 'City of the Lotus', near modern Peshawar, around 20 ce. The tiny casket, less than three inches high but made from solid gold and studded with glowing garnets, shows the oldest known examples of the classical Gandharan Buddha in a monk's robe with Hellenistic drapery and wearing his hair in the Romano-Greek style, clearly influenced by depictions of Apollo. This primal figure of the Buddha is depicted under an arcade of cusped arches, flanked by the Hindu gods Indra and Brahma, both shown wearing togas and turbans and facing the saviour with hands folded in prayer and adoration.[52] Under other arches stand early representations of Bodhisattvas, shown with long hair flowing down from a large chignon topknot.[53]

It is possible, of course, that the image of the Buddha developed simultaneously in both Mathura and Gandhara.[54] Either way, these new iconic forms were popular with both devotees and patrons and they quickly spread around the region, leading to the flourishing of spectacular Gandharan and Mathura Buddhas and Bodhisattvas carved in a remarkable new fusion of styles. These took elements from the art of many peoples – from Roman Egypt to Palmyra and Hellenised Parthian Iran – but bore above all the unmistakable imprint of Roman influence on Indian ideas and their expression in Indian art.[55]

Colonial British archaeologists and art historians tended to see the classical iconography of Gandhara as a memory and legacy of Alexander the Great's successors, the Bactrian Greeks. But the chronology of Gandharan art simply does not support this: the first Gandharan pieces, dating from around 50 ce, date from about 200 years after the fall of the last Bactrian strongholds in c.150 bce. Moreover the earliest clearly datable Gandharan sculptures are among the least Greek in appearance.

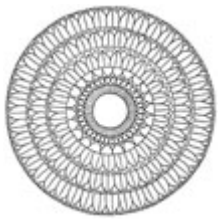
What is clear is that while Gandharan art was strongly grounded in the sophisticated art of early Buddhist India, and the technique of visual storytelling of the Buddha's lives is not imported but is a Gandharan innovation, the style used by the sculptors shows the imprint less of 200-year-old Greek precedents more of current Roman and particularly Romano-Egyptian fashions of sculpture of the first and second century ce.[56]

These seem to have been carried into Gandhara through imported luxury goods such as those found at Bagram, but maybe also by itinerant sculptors from the eastern fringes of the Roman Empire. For Gandharan imitations of classical art rarely misunderstand their classical western models, and the sculptors show complete familiarity with the rules of Graeco-Roman art, while brilliantly transforming it for use in Buddhist worship and cross-fertilising it with Indian motifs and imagery. This supports the notion that living Roman artists may have been present in Gandhara in person during the development of its Buddhist art, collaborating with and instructing local craftsmen.[57] It is also quite possible that these itinerant sculptors were from pagan Graeco-Romano-Egyptian backgrounds, perhaps fleeing the Christian takeover of Egypt and the increasingly violent persecution there of all pagans and non-Orthodox Christians.[58]

The earliest images to show marked Roman borrowings are the narrative bands around early Gandharan stupas. Both tell the life story of Gautama Buddha. They are often accompanied by Roman imagery such as Corinthian capitals and Dionysian scenes of music, dance and merry-making, as well as marine gods and half-human, half-dragon sea monsters, even a depiction of the Trojan Horse. The scenes of mourning that accompany images of the death of the Buddha are especially classical in their realistic depiction of the devastating grief by his followers.

These Mediterranean borrowings only grew more marked in time. One sculpture at Hadda, showing the Buddha's protector Vajrapani, is probably modelled on an image of Herakles, but holding a thunderbolt not a club; and the fertility goddess Hariti appears as Fortuna with her cornucopia of riches; her consort Panchika is a Gandharan version of Mercury. Garuda swoops in, transformed mid-flight into a Roman eagle. There are depictions of Apollo and Daphne, Venus and Eros, as well as no less Roman-looking caryatids, tritons, centaurs, garland-bearing cupids and even putti or cherubim that seem to have flown straight off a Roman or early Christian sarcophagus.

As well as producing the much celebrated Gandharan Buddhist sculptures, Afghanistan and Central Asia also became a centre of Hindu painting and sculpture. Only fragments survive, but these are often of great beauty, not least in a third-century image of Oesho/Shiva now in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Four-armed and three-headed, with a prominent third eye, the god wears an animal skin and a belted, diaphanous garment and holds a trident. Here, in the sophisticated multicultural style that developed in the Kushan realm, Indian divine iconography merges with Iranian composition and Graeco-Roman naturalism, in a compelling and unique new style.[59]



By the end of the first century CE, a radically new form of Buddhism began to spread through the same mountains of Gandhara that were developing these remarkably Roman-looking Buddhas.

Buddhism in its initial incarnation had been a somewhat abstract and austere religion that offered only a voyage to oblivion; even that was only for the select few and after many lifetimes of struggle. Lay believers – the merchants and artisans who made up the Buddhist faithful – appear to have yearned for something easier, more tangible and more rewarding. The new Mahayana, or 'Great Vehicle', Buddhism, which many scholars now believe probably originated in Kushan territory, was the answer to their prayers. It offered salvation to all sentient beings, because all sentient beings possessed the potential for Enlightenment and full Buddhahood.[60]

In the new body of scriptures of Mahayana Buddhism which emerged around this time, a believer could move more quickly across the sea of suffering and accelerate his path towards Enlightenment by invoking the intercession of a divine host of compassionate Bodhisattvas. In the meantime the Bodhisattvas inhabited the Pure Lands, or Paradises, where they could postpone, but not renounce, the goal of full Buddhahood.[61]

Enlightenment could also be accelerated by intense devotion and secret mantras as well as by earning merit through gifts. Indeed, the *Lotus Sutra*, a Mahayana text written about 100 CE, helpfully lists which valuable substances were most suitable as gifts to the monasteries; diamonds and emeralds, plus the 'seven jewels', namely gold, silver, pearls, red coral, crystal, agate and lapis lazuli, were singled out as being especially acceptable.[62] This was something easily comprehended by the newly rich traders of Central Asia:

by giving to the monasteries, they could buy their salvation – and also, more immediately, the good karma that they hoped would guarantee a safe passage, riches and a comfortable rebirth as fruits of their pious donations to the Buddhist community.

Mahayanists believed in a great plurality of Buddhas: the historical Buddha, Gautama Shakyamuni, was, they believed, only one among many. It was realised that Shakyamuni had been preceded by many other forms of the Buddha, with many future Buddhas still to come. The *Lotus Sutra* is full of references to one such Bodhisattva in particular: the future Buddha Maitreya.[63] As the popularity of this text spread north and west, its ideas about a saviour became intermingled with the cult of the Indo-Persian god Mithras which still lingered in Kushan Central Asia.

Two dazzling Buddhist brothers from a Brahminical background in Peshawar played a crucial part in the development of the cult of Maitreya, which would go on to transform Buddhism as it moved northwards and eastwards towards China. Both were men of extraordinary ability, brilliance and imagination. Asanga (c.320–90) and his brother Vasubandhu were both natives of Gandhara, born in Purusapura, modern Peshawar. Both left home early to became philosopher monks in the fastness of the Karakoram mountains. After many years of lonely meditation and fasting they were both granted a series of extraordinary revelations.

Asanga is said to have spent twelve years meditating alone on the mountain tops, desperately praying to be given a vision of the great future Buddha, the Bodhisattva Maitreya, in his idyllic Tusita heaven. Eventually, despairing of success, Asanga gave up. But on his way down the mountain, overcome with compassion, he stopped to help a suffering, mange-struck dog lying in great pain by the roadside. To his astonishment, the dog revealed himself as Maitreya. The Bodhisattva, he realised, had always been there, but he could only be seen through the eyes of compassion.

The Bodhisattva immediately took Asanga up to the Tusita heaven and agreed to begin his instruction in the most secret of Mahayana doctrines. It was, claimed Asanga, in Tusita heaven, from the personal dictation of the great Bodhisattva of the future, that he was instructed in the esoterica of Mahayana, and especially in the new Yogacara doctrines. These he wrote down as five of the foundational texts of Yogacara, including his great *Ornament for the Realisations*.[64]

On his return to his monastery outside Peshawar, Asanga organised his revelations as the *Yogacarabhumi*, 'Treatise on the Stages of Yogic Practice'. This set out the various stages of the Mahayana path to Buddhahood which became a central text of the great university of Nalanda. Asanga claimed that his path could teach the practitioner to see through the distortions of common consciousness and allow accomplished Yogacara masters to experience the world in its full reality: as a void, from which all sense of self had disappeared – the ultimate 'perfected' truth experienced by liberated Bodhisattvas.[65] In the centuries to come, this much mythologised text would be the lure that would draw Buddhist monks such as the celebrated Xuanzang to India in search of manuscripts to translate into Chinese.

Meanwhile, the second brother, Vasubandhu, compiled the equally revered *Treasury of Abhidharma*, said to be the most subtle systemisation of the Mahayana doctrine on the nature of Maya or Illusion. It was the beginning of a whole school of highly abstract Buddhist thought that drew heavily on Greek philosophy and flourished particularly among the scholar monks of the university that had developed in the once Bactrian Greek city of Taxila.

Even before Asanga received his visions, spectacular black-schist figures of the future Buddha Maitreya began to be sculpted in the monasteries of Gandhara, so giving magnificent visual form to these highly complex and abstract Mahayana ideas. In the art of Gandhara, the saviour Maitreya came to be depicted as a beautiful young Kushan prince or a richly adorned aristocrat, with a perfect body, unmarred by human flaws. The future Buddha is usually shown standing, meditating, preaching or fasting. He has long, waxed moustaches and wavy hair, and is hung with elaborate jewellery – torcs, earrings and necklaces, while amulet cartouches are strung over his muscular chest. He is shod in the finest bejewelled sandals and wears a heavily draped toga-like Greek himation; but he also grasps the waterflask of an ascetic, or a Brahmin, in his left hand. His hair is oiled and groomed into a beehive topknot, adjusted to Hellenistic hairdressing, and a round nimbus frames his perfect face.[66] His expression is at once one of pride and humility, power and gentleness, royalty and asceticism. His physique is magnificent: muscles ripple beneath the diaphanous folds of the Buddha's robe. He stands tall or else sits with half-closed eyes and legs folded in a position of languid relaxation. His high, unfurrowed forehead is punctuated with an auspicious round urna mark. His face is full and round; the nose small and straight; and the lips firm and proud.

These handsome and elegant saviours are depicted as masters of self-control and spiritual discipline, yet they somehow still manage to emanate sympathy and compassion. They are caught suspended in the crosswinds between karma and Enlightenment, between this world of suffering and Tusita heaven, waiting for the time the Buddha's teachings have disappeared and he will be born again into a royal family in India. Moreover, unlike the historical Buddha Shakyamuni who has gone ahead to Nirvana, leaving only his example to be imitated, Maitreya is always instantly available to all devotees who pray to his image to save them from perils and ultimately help them escape the cycle of rebirth.

The same standing Buddha image draped in a himation or Greek toga also appears on some of the coins of the greatest of Kushan rulers, Kanishka (r.c.127–150 ce). Kanishka's reign saw the apex of Kushan power as the empire spread from Uzbekistan to Allahabad/Prayagraj in north India; he also crushed the Parthians of Iran and sent an embassy to the Emperor Antoninus Pius in Rome.[67] His now headless statue in Mathura is inscribed 'Kaisara [Caesar?], the great king, king of kings, son of god' and depicts him as a massively powerful warrior, belted and booted, with one hand on the pommel of his sword and the other propping up a mighty mace. He has heavily padded felt boots and the fringe of his stiff kaftan is trimmed with pearls.[68]

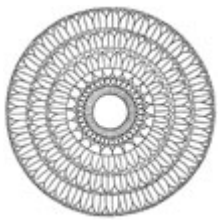
On the back of one of Kanishka's coins is the standing figure of a heavily moustachioed Buddha, robed in a long, elegantly folded toga, with his hand raised in the gesture of fearlessness and protection. Underneath, in a script adapted from Greek, is a legend which reads simply: 'BODDO'. This was the first coin anywhere to depict the Buddha.[69]

It was probably struck to mark Kanishka's most important act of Buddhist patronage: the building of the celebrated stupa outside Peshawar whose dome was twice the size of the Pantheon in Rome. It could also have marked the occasion when, according to Buddhist tradition, Kanishka opened the Fourth Buddhist Council in Kashmir, something which highlighted the new importance of the region as a Buddhist centre. Buddhist tradition remembers Kanishka as a great champion of the Sangha, the Buddhist community, even a second Ashoka, but the evidence from inscriptions and Kanishka's own coins seems to show that he himself looked first to the Persian love goddess Nana as his primary deity, and his coins consistently show him making sacrifices at Zoroastrian fire altars.[70] On his coins, the Shiva-like figure with the bull is identified as the Iranian wind god, Oesho: in this syncretic world of evolving divine pantheons, at a crossroads where different civilisations and deities merged, different peoples no doubt recognised and worshipped different gods in the same images.[71]

In the same way, the imagery of the lion-riding Iranian goddess Nana to whom Kanishka appears particularly attached was passed on to the still much venerated Hindu goddess Durga Simhavahini, who can be seen seated on her roaring lion throughout modern India, and who is particularly venerated in Bengal, most spectacularly in the festival of Durga Puja, which has grown in recent years to become the annual celebration of Bengaliness.[72] The iconography of the lion-riding goddess has a long ancestry going back to seals from Ur III (c.2100 bce) showing the lion-mounted Ishtar/Inanna, but it first appears in India on Kushan coins from the reign of Kanishka's successor Huveska (r. from 150 ce) and on Mathura sculpture of the same date.[73]

During the first centuries ce, with Buddhism now firmly established in Gandhara and Kashmir, Indian Buddhist missionaries began to use these areas as bases to spread their religion northwards. From monasteries in what is now Afghanistan, Indian missionaries took advantage of the peace and stability of Kushan rule to bring the message of the Buddha along the trade routes which flanked the empty sands of the Taklamakan desert, to the north-easternmost Kushan outposts of Kashgar and Kucha in what is now Xinjiang.

In this way, for the first time they established a foothold along the land routes linking India and Central Asia to China and the Far East.[74]



From the middle third century ce, rock-cut monasteries on the model of Bhaja and Ajanta, many of them containing spectacular masterpieces of Buddhist monastic art, began to appear in caves dotting the cliff

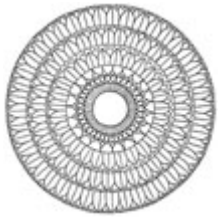
faces that lined the edge of the desert above the oasis towns of the Tarim basin. Here the monks carved and burrowed meditation chambers deep into the rock, so creating some of the first Buddhist monasteries in what is now China, extending the influence of Indian ideas far to the north and east.[75]

At this time the oasis towns on either side of the Taklamakan were developing rapidly thanks to greatly increased agricultural production and to the introduction of large-scale irrigation projects and new farming techniques.[76] As a result, the population grew and trade expanded, and the rising affluence helped create for the first time the conditions needed to patronise monastic Buddhism. By the early fourth century there were no fewer than 10,000 monks living among the 236 cave temples in Kizil and Kucha on the northern edge of the desert.

Sculptors and painters, many of them clearly from Gandhara and Afghanistan, were called to fill the newly excavated caves with sculptures and images from the Jatakas and the *Life of the Buddha*. The monastery at Miran on the southern rim of the Taklamakan desert in Xinjiang was one of the earliest and was founded in c.350–400 ce, not very far from where some of the very earliest surviving fragments of the text of the *Mahabharata* have recently been dug up. The walls of Miran were decorated by a painter who signed himself Tita/Titus and who from his name was possibly an expatriate Roman. His very classical work drew on the iconography of Kushan Gandhara to illustrate the story of the Buddha's various lives and other themes taken from the various Buddhist scriptures. But Titus painted borders with putti carrying swags and garlands and used Roman techniques of portraiture; his understanding of Roman art is clear in every stroke he painted. More intriguingly still, the characteristically huge, luminous eyes of his subjects look very much like the work then being produced in the desert monasteries of Coptic Egypt.[77]

Shortly after this, other anonymous painters got to work at the cave monastery of Kizil near the largest of the oasis towns, Kucha, to the north of the Taklamakan desert. The rock-cut caves here were soon filled with fantastical murals of wild and surreal visions, derived partly from the parched, otherworldly surroundings of the desert monasteries but clearly also from the esoteric yogic practices and rigorous austerities performed by the monks who lived there.

Some of the holy men are depicted in these murals like shamans, suspended in the act of levitation, still holding their staffs and bowls. Others can be seen circling the image of the Buddha, flying through the air with rays and flames shooting from his shoulders, hips and feet. There are winged heavenly musicians and other strange creatures. Some are from this world – such as the bizarre blue elephants and flights of white geese circling a crescent moon – but many others come from the world beyond: hungry ghosts and *asuras* – powerful demons – and contorted beings undergoing the tortures of hell. There are representations of monks meditating on grinning white skeletons, while others contemplate skulls, locked deep in meditation on the illusions of mortality.[78]



Yet, for all the otherworldly, mystical strangeness of these images, Kizil, together with the nearby oasis town of Kucha, was in fact a major centre of higher Buddhist scholarship. The caves were built during the lifetime of the celebrated translator monk Kumarajiva, described by one historian as 'the St. Augustine of late antique China, whose life is recorded in no less than three contemporary biographies'.[79]

Kumarajiva (344–413) was the brilliant and prolific half-Indian translator who rendered complex Mahayana Buddhist texts such as the *Lotus Sutra* from Sanskrit into Chinese with far greater clarity and precision than ever before. In time this bilingual monk would become the most influential translator, transmitter and interpreter of Buddhist texts in Chinese and one of the most celebrated of all Indian Buddhist missionaries in China. His work did much to ease the passage of Buddhism into China.[80]

Kumarajiva was the son of a Brahmin Indian minister, probably originally from Gandhara, whose family had served as officials in the court of Kucha for many generations; his mother was a young Kucha princess, the sister of the King of the wealthy oasis who had become an independent monarch after the fall of the Kushans. Kumarajiva was born at a time of great Indian influence on Central Asia and grew up speaking both Gandhari – a form of Indian Prakrit – and Kuchean, the easternmost of Indo-European languages.

Kumarajiva's mother was clearly a remarkable woman in her own right: brilliant, independent and forceful. According to Kumarajiva's friend and biographer Huijiao:

> The king had a younger sister who had just reached the age of twenty. She was known for her sharp wits and could commit to memory things she had just seen or heard. She had a red mole on her body that was indicative of her mothering a wise child. Princes from distant kingdoms had sought her hand in marriage, but she would not consent to any. When she saw the young minister, Kumärayäna, she desired to marry him. Therefore she forced him to take her as his wife and became pregnant with Kumärajiva. Already when Kumärajiva was in the womb, his mother could feel her own mind becoming sharper.
>
> There in the great Buddhist temple of Cakir gathered many renowned and enlightened monks. When she learned of this, along with the great ladies of the royal clan and various virtuous nuns, she made offerings to them, held feasts in their honour and listened to their preaching of the *dharma*. Kumärajiva's mother also was suddenly fluent in the Indian language [that is, Sanskrit] without having ever learned it. All were in awe of her ability as she could exhaustively answer even the most difficult questions.[81]

Soon after Kumarajiva's birth, the Princess announced that she wanted to become a Buddhist nun, after being struck by the extreme fragility of life when she stumbled across some bones in a graveyard:

> While on an excursion out of the town, she witnessed human remains scattered about among graves. Thereby she deeply understood the root of suffering and resolutely vowed to become a nun. She began to refuse food and drink as long as her hair was not shaven. After six days and nights, she had become so frail that many feared she could not survive until dawn. Her husband feared for her life and hence consented. Even then she would not consume anything for her head had not been shaved. Only after her husband had ordered someone to get rid of her hair, did she swallow some food and drink. The next morning she received the precepts and was particularly fond of practicing meditation techniques. She was dedicated to perfecting them without a moment of slacking.[82]

When Kumarajiva was seven she was ordained, and set off with her child over the Indus to Gandhara and Kashmir in order to study the sacred Buddhist texts under the most famous of Kashmiri masters, Bandhudatta, who was also from the royal family of Gandhara.[83]

The young Kumarajiva quickly mastered Sanskrit and proved to have a remarkable memory. In his early youth he succeeded in memorising the sutras. At this period, while still studying in Kashmir, Kumarajiva refuted the arguments of some Buddhist theologians who initially had refused to take him seriously on account of his extreme youth.

After their studies were completed, mother and son went to Kashgar. There they stayed for one year as Kumarajiva continued his education in Nikaya Buddhism, the four Vedas and the five sciences, the shastras and Puranas, astronomy and mathematics, as well as the occult sciences. Eventually, having settled him in his new situation, Kumarajiva's mother left him there and set off on her own on pilgrimage to the Buddhist holy places of India. The two never met again.

It was in Kashgar, after his mother's departure, that Kumarajiva first discovered, and fell in love with, Mahayana literature, initially through a former prince of Yarkand who had become a teacher of Mahayana philosophy. He was especially taken with the complex philosophical speculations of the second-century Indian monk Nagarjuna and his ideas of *sunyata*, 'the synonym of that which has no cause, that which is beyond thought or conception, that which is not produced, that which is not born, that which is without measure'.[84] After he had been initiated into this field, he said that when he studied the traditional Buddhist texts 'he was like one who does not recognise gold and considered stone to be a thing of wonder'. He made a formal conversion to Mahayana Buddhism, then returned home to Kucha to preach the new doctrine under the patronage of his uncle, the King.

Here Kumarajiva found important Mahayana texts in the library, and his biographers tell many tales of the efforts made by devils to distract him from his studies:

> When he first attempted to study the scripture, Paplyas (that is, the Devil) came and concealed the words. Only the blank tablets were there to be seen. Kumarajiva knew it was Pãplyas' doing and vowed

> to redouble his dedication. The words reappeared after Pãplyas disappeared, thus enabling him to carry on with studying and chanting the sutra. Kumarajiva then heard a voice in the air saying, 'You are an intelligent man. What use is there in reading this?' Kumarajiva replied, 'Devil! It is time for you to leave.' Kumarajiva stayed for two years during which he extensively chanted the Mahayana sutras and sastras and fully comprehended their profound meanings.[85]

He finally took holy orders aged twenty, in the palace.

Excited by the subtleties of Mahayana, Kumarajiva determined to convert his former teacher, whom he invited from Kashmir to Kucha to discuss these issues: 'Master Bandhudatta asked Kumarajiva, "What have you discovered in the teachings of Mahayana that is so extraordinary that it prompted you to follow it?" Kumarajiva replied, "The Mahayana [teachings] are so profound and purely illuminating that all other teachings appear empty in comparison." '[86]

Kumarajiva then explained to Bandhudatta the profundities of the Mahayana doctrines, emphasising especially the concept of *sunyata*, the Mahayana theory of Emptiness: that all elements are void, and that it is this which constitutes ultimate reality. Master Bandhudatta replied that such a doctrine was just 'empty talk'.[87] Then to illustrate his point, he told a story which sounds like an early version of the Emperor's New Clothes:

> A madman asked a weaver to weave as fine a thread as possible. The weaver did so, and produced a thread as fine as a molecule, but the madman complained it was still too coarse. The weaver tried again, and still could not please the madman. Now the weaver became angry, and when the madman came a third time, he pointed to the air and said, 'Here is your thread.' The madman protested he could not see the thread, whereupon the weaver said it was so fine no human eye could see it. The madman was now satisfied, paid the weaver, and presented the invisible thread to the king.

In reality, said Bandhudatta, there was no such thread, just as there was no substance to the Mahayana doctrine of sunyata. However, Kumarajiva eventually succeeded in converting Bandhudatta.[88]

It was Kumarajiva's fate to live at a time of great unrest in China, known as the age of the Sixteen Kingdoms. In 384 ce, when Kumarajiva was about forty, Kucha was suddenly attacked and looted by the armies of a warlord called Lu Guang. Kumarajiva found himself seized as part of the loot and transported to the General's capital in Gansu. There he quickly mastered Chinese. Although Kumarajiva was now a celibate monk, the General believed he was too brilliant and charismatic a figure not to have children. Kumarajiva put up resistance at first, so the General got him drunk and tempted him into sleeping with a beautiful courtesan. This was the first in a number of such incidents that eventually resulted in Kumarajiva fathering twins, thus breaking all monastic codes.[89]

Seventeen years later, in 401, Kumarajiva was captured for a second time, and this time he was transported to the Chinese capital, Chang'an, on the orders of the Emperor Yao Xing. Fortunately in the Emperor he found a patron who not only venerated him as a powerful *acharya* or guru, but also understood the value of his rare linguistic talents.[90]

The Emperor was concerned that there were few Buddhists sufficiently fluent in Sanskrit to read the Sanskrit Buddhist texts with any subtlety and confidence, and that such translations as did exist were inaccurate and inadequate: Sanskrit and Chinese were, after all, from quite different language families and rendering highly abstract notions from one into another was no easy task. In this matter, Kumarajiva was in full agreement, and allegedly remarked that reading the sutras in a poor translation was like eating rice that somebody else had chewed. He complained bitterly that the capital was an intellectual wasteland where there were no good Buddhist libraries and where Buddhist scholars were few and far between. 'Now in the land of Qin,' he moaned, 'I am like a bird with clipped wings.'[91]

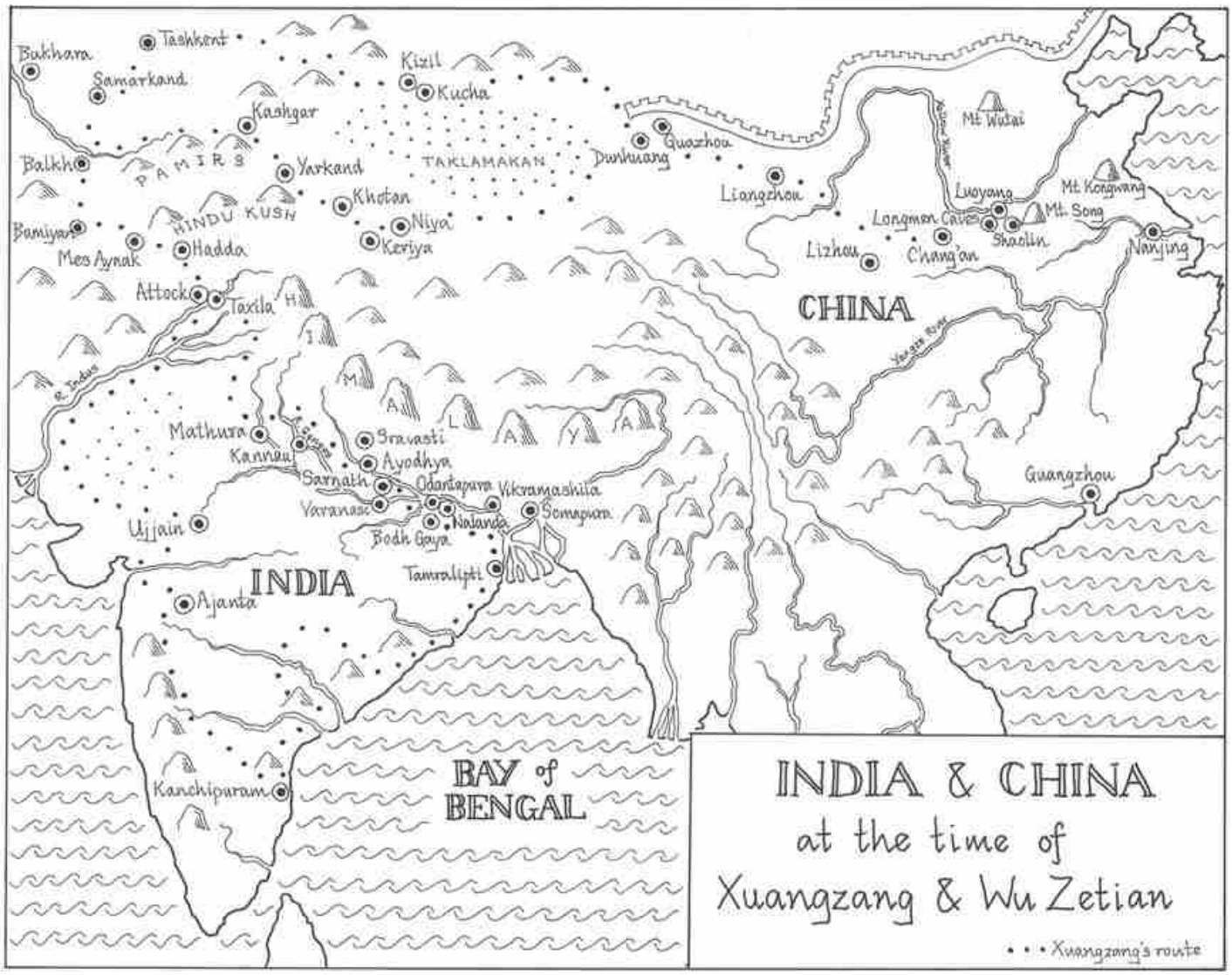
The Emperor therefore put Kumarajiva in charge of an office of translation, summoning several thousand talented translator monks and theological specialists from across China and Central Asia to work alongside him, including his Kashmiri friend Dharmamitra, also from Kucha, and several of his former Mahayana students from Kashgar. The greatest Mahayana master of the day, Huiyuan, added his thoughts in a lengthy correspondence with Kumarajiva that itself went on to become a classic Mahayana text. All the scholars were provided with writing materials as well as a corps of editors and copyists.[92]

Soon a remarkable body of scholars had gathered and a highly structured method of working was

established. Doctrinal and theological issues were debated; old and flawed translations were compared to Sanskrit originals, and Daoist terminology and concepts alien to the original texts were weeded out. Kumarajiva also became famous for teaching advanced techniques of meditation.

For thirteen years, until his death in 413, Kumarajiva and his fellow translators laboured away. The result was a series of 300 translated works notable for their quality as much as their quantity, and remarkable for their spectacular fluency and readability, quite free from the technical vocabulary for which higher Buddhist theology is often notorious. Kumarajiva felt free to edit portions that appeared verbose to Chinese ears, while retaining their essential ideas. This led some monastic pedants and puritans to make unkind jokes linking the looseness of Kumarajiva's translations to the looseness of his morals.[93] Kumarajiva's version of the *Lotus Sutra* is still in common use across China today and is preferred by many Buddhists to more accurate but less fluent later reworkings.

Thanks to these texts, Buddhism began to filter into all levels of Chinese society and became especially popular at court. The stage was now set for the Buddhist conquest of China.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Yarkand
TAKLAMAKAN
Dunhuang
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Liangzhou
Mt. Wutai
Luoyang
Mt. Kongwang
Mt. Song
Longmen Caves
Shaolin
Nanjing
Lizhou
C'hang'an
Bamiyan
HINDU KUSH
Khotan
Niya
Keriya
Mes Aynak
Hadda
Attock
Taxila
CHINA
Yangtze River
R. Indus
Mathura
Kannau
Sravasti
Ayodhya
Sarnath
Varanasi
Odantapura
Vikramashila
Somapura
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The Sea of Jewels: Exploring the Great Library of Nalanda

4

Late in the autumn of 629 ce, a tall, well-built man, twenty-nine years old, set off on foot from the walled capital city of Chang'an. He was heading westwards, towards the wastes of the Taklamakan desert and beyond that, so he hoped, over the peaks of the Pamirs.

In many ways the walker could not have chosen a worse time to set off on such an ambitious journey. The country was still in the middle of a civil war, and robbers and brigands haunted the unpoliced roads. To make matters worse, there was also a ban on citizens leaving the country, part of an attempt by the new Tang authorities to stop people joining the insurgent groups lurking in the western border country. But the walker was no rebel. Instead he was an urbane and learned monk, ordained into one of the most philosophical of the Mahayana Buddhist orders.

Xuanzang wanted to travel to the source of the religious tradition to which he had given his life. Specifically, he wanted to enrol at the great Indian Buddhist monastery and university of Nalanda. There he wished to study the manuscripts held in the largest Buddhist library in the world. Nalanda, however, lay 3,000 perilous miles south-west of Chang'an, and getting there would be no easy task, particularly as the Tang authorities had just turned down his application for a travel permit.

Not only was it a time of violent upheaval, it was also the year of a great famine, and there was every likelihood that if the authorities or the brigands did not stop Xuanzang, starvation would.[1] But the monk was well used to taking risks. Although he had been born into a family of elite Confucian scholars and public officials – his great-grandfather had been Governor of Shandong and his grandfather was the head of the Imperial College at Beijing, in reward for which the Emperor had endowed the family with the revenues of an entire town – it was nevertheless Xuanzang's fate to live in the violent and fractured period between two great dynasties. One, the Sui, was falling and the other, the Tang, had yet fully to establish itself.[2]

Xuanzang's father, a 'brilliant and elegant man, with bright eyes, who used to dress himself in the manner of a Confucian scholar', reacted to the disintegration of his world by immersing himself in the classics. 'Anticipating the fall of the Sui, he buried himself in his study with his books. Many offers of distinguished

positions were pressed on him, which he persistently refused.'[3]

After his death, two of his sons became Buddhist monks, hoping to find within themselves a peace that was notably absent in the world around them. But there was no escape from the endemic violence. In 618, aged thirteen, Xuanzang and his elder brother had had to flee for their lives through the fields along the Yellow River after their monastery in Luoyang was threatened. At this time, according to Xuanzang's friend and biographer Huili, 'the House of Sui lost power, and the country fell into a great turmoil'.

The imperial capital became a nest for brigands like Zhe the Bandit, and the region between the Yellow River and the Luo river turned into a cavern for men as brutal as jackals and wolves. Civilisation collapsed, and the Buddhist community dispersed. White skeletons were scattered at crossroads and the region was depopulated; no smoke drifted from cooking fires.[4]

Xuanzang was deeply troubled. It was not just that society was disintegrating in front of his eyes; he was worried that the Buddhist tradition he lived and studied was deeply corrupted too. He could see that the texts he used were full of errors and discrepancies. 'When he compared editions of the holy scriptures,' wrote Huili, 'they showed differences either vaguely or manifestly, so that he was at a loss to decide which of the theories he should follow.' Despite risking his life travelling through the burning countryside from monastery to monastery in search of Buddhist masters who could resolve these inconsistencies, he found none who could adequately answer his questions. Xuanzang felt a growing need 'to make further specialised studies and to resolve the contradictions … Thus he resolved to travel to the West, to India, to clear his doubts.'[5]

He had heard that the university monastery of Nalanda contained the fullest and most complete collections of the texts of the tradition known as Yogacara ('Practice of Yoga'), a spiritual path first outlined by the Gandharan monk Asanga, at the dictation of the Bodhisattva Maitreya, or so the monks maintained. Asanga maintained that our experience of the world is nothing but an illusion, a misleading creation of our own consciousness. Xuanzang believed the writings of Asanga's Yogacara school to be the peak of all Buddhist thought, and the one which had preserved the most profound and authentic secrets of his own Mahayana tradition. In particular Xuanzang wished to seek out one specific manuscript – the *Yogacarabhumi*, 'Treatise on the Stages of Yogic Practice'. This was a text for which Xuanzang had been searching all his adult life.

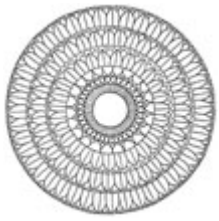
Xuanzang had also heard that at Nalanda the supreme master of Yogacara, a 106-year-old scholar called the Venerable Shilabhadra, was still teaching and, despite his age, taking on new pupils. Ignoring the many dangers, Xuanzang resolved to set off westwards, knowing that centuries earlier other Chinese monks such as Faxian had successfully made the same journey and returned alive, even leaving brief accounts of their journeys. 'As the road was obstructed and long,' wrote Xuanzang,

> the transmission [of Buddhism to China] was still incomplete … Secretly praying for spiritual protection, I determined to go out from the land of my birth and throw myself into the realm of ten thousand deaths. When passing in the footsteps of the Buddha, I paid my respects to the numinous [presence] he left behind. If there were people who propagated the dharma, I sought out their authentic teaching. When I passed through a place, I was moved to see what I had never seen before. When I encountered a word, I rejoiced at hearing what I had never heard before. In this way, I exhausted my life's resources to copy texts that were missing at home.[6]

Xuanzang's sixteen years of travels, and the different accounts that he, his biographer Huili and his various followers and correspondents have left of his journey, bring to light an entire world that is otherwise lost in shadow and archaeological ambiguity. It is not just that we find ourselves able to draw on a sudden glut of well-verified letters to and from Xuanzang and his learned correspondents; we also have Xuanzang's own travel book, *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions*, the most comprehensive account of seventh-century Central Asia and India ever produced, and written with all the care of a sceptical scholar who was unusually scrupulous in matters of fact. 'Although it was difficult to exhaustively verify all matters,' he wrote in a postscript, 'I never resorted to speculation.'[7] Most remarkable of all, at over 80,000 characters, Huili's biography, written during his master's old age and completed after his death, is the fullest single biography to survive from pre-modern China.[8]

These different sources illuminated the intellectual and spiritual bedrock of the Indian ideas that were finding their way over the mountains and deserts and coming to change the way people in China lived and

thought. It is one of the richest moments of cultural and philosophical interaction in world history. In the course of China's first really intimate encounter with an equal civilisation, not only did Buddhism profoundly transform China, bringing about a massive metamorphosis of its arts, history, society and culture at both popular and court levels; at the same time, and no less profoundly, Buddhism was changed and moulded by China.[9]



No one really knows when Buddhism first reached China. Xuanzang himself believed that it had arrived as a result of 'a dream of the Emperor of the Han dynasty'. According to this legend, the Chinese Emperor Ming (r.58–75 ce) had a vision of a golden being who had a nimbus behind his head that shone like the sun. The Emperor asked his advisers about this strange apparition and was told that in the west there was a deity named the Buddha. 'As a result,' wrote Xuanzang, 'envoys were sent to the West, and consequently the Right Dharma was transmitted.'[10]

The first bringers of this Buddhist *dharma* were said to be two Indian monks who came to the capital of Luoyang carrying their scriptures on the back of a white horse. The monks copied out their texts and made a standing Buddha image; they also built the first Buddhist monastery in China, named the White Horse Monastery. After the missionaries had returned to India, the Emperor had copies of the statue made, which he installed in his palace on the Terrace of Cooling Freshness. These images were said to be devoutly worshipped by the Emperor, his family and the court. Sadly, however, there appears to be no historical basis for any of these legends.[11]

The historical record tells a rather different story. Most early references to Buddhism in China talk of the religion only in the context of foreigners, whether traders, refugees, diplomats, missionaries or hostages. After a couple of brief mentions of Buddhist monks and followers in the capital Luoyang in the first century ce, Buddhists start to appear regularly in the writings of Chinese officials in the early second century; officials begin to show growing knowledge of, interest in and familiarity with the new religion as the century progresses.[12] Around 130 ce, for example, one official drops a mention of Buddhist monks into a poem describing the loveliness of the dancing girls of the capital. 'Kicking off their vermilion slippers among the trays and flagons, they flapped their flowing sleeves,' he wrote. 'Their perfect faces, their sumptuous clothes, were radiant with beauty. With their lovely eyes they cast bewitching glances upon the company. One look from them would surrender a city. Even if one were as sternly upright as a Buddhist monk, one could not but be captivated.'[13]

Around the same time, Buddhist scriptures began to be translated in Luoyang under the patronage of the Emperors Huan (r.168–72) and Ling Di (r.168–89), both of whom were said to be fond of 'foreign dress, foreign hangings, foreign beds, foreign chairs, foreign food, foreign harps, foreign flutes and foreign dance'.[14] Among the early translators was An Shigao, a Parthian prince turned Buddhist monk who arrived in 148 ce, bringing new Buddhist knowledge in astronomy, medicine and techniques of meditation. He gathered a team around him and translated some thirty Theravada Buddhist texts into Chinese over twenty years.[15]

By 191 ce there is a reference to a Chinese official who had built a large Buddhist temple in Jiangsu near the southern port of Lianyungang. He filled it with 'gilt bronze statues in human shape clothed in precious brocade' and held a great feast to celebrate the Buddha's birthday, at which 10,000 people are said to have gathered, many of whom then embraced the Buddhist faith.[16]

The very earliest surviving Buddhist images in China can be found in the vicinity of this temple, carved on boulders at nearby Mount Kongwang. There are in all 105 surviving images of the Buddha sculpted around the mountain. Some show a standing Buddha with a close resemblance to the BODDO coin of the Kushan King Kanishka, while another depicts a donor figure in Kushan costume, presumably commissioned by Buddhist Kushan merchants who had sailed up the China coast to trade.[17] But, as in many early appearances of Buddhist images in Chinese tombs and ceramics, the images of the Buddha are mixed up with Daoist figures such as the Queen Mother of the West and her Magical Land, and the Lord King of the

East, suggesting that initially the Buddha had merely been added to the existing pantheon of Daoist deities, borrowed to illustrate non-Buddhist beliefs or else simply misunderstood, particularly when he appears in Han graves as a foreign deity offering immortality to dead souls.[18]

Throughout the second century Buddhism remained a minority faith associated with wealthy diaspora communities of outsiders who had brought their new religion with them, either by sea or overland through Central Asia and who were allowed to settle in the Middle Kingdom. Among the mainstream Han Chinese, Buddhism initially appears to have made little progress. It was just too foreign, and indigenous Chinese systems of philosophy were too strongly rooted and well established to allow the new religion to gain much purchase.

In South and South-east Asia, it was trade and growing prosperity that created the ideal conditions for the sudden spread of Buddhism. In China, by contrast, it was war and devastation. The fall of the Han dynasty in 220 ce, followed by a succession of natural disasters – famine, plague, locusts and floods – ruptured the continuity of classical Chinese civilisation, undermined old certainties and broke the self-confidence of the Confucian elite, chipping away at the Chinese conviction of cultural superiority.

As the last Han Emperor abdicated, China was divided and overrun by Huns and other steppe nomads.[19] The Han population, including the remaining members of the imperial house and the courtly elite, fled en masse from the north to the south. A Sogdian merchant described the chaos to his colleagues back home in Samarkand: 'Those Huns who were yesterday the Emperor's vassals have overthrown the Empire. The last emperor has fled from Luoyang because of the famine, and his palace and the walled city were set on fire … Luoyang is no more! If I was to write to you everything about how China has fared, it would be beyond grief.'[20]

The decline and disintegration, counter-intuitively, created the perfect opportunity for the rise of Buddhism in China. It did this partly by discrediting the old Confucian order and partly by creating a space that allowed new ideas to flourish. Disillusioned members of the old scholar-gentry class began to look for other ways to give meaning to their lives and, in their disappointment with the old order, accepted the new foreign faith. Buddhism also offered the concrete prospect of rebirth after death, no small consolation as lives became notably shorter during the upheavals of the fourth century. Just as the collapse of the Mediterranean classical world and the sack of Rome by the Goths in the fifth century ce provoked questions to which Christianity seemed to provide the answer, so the break-up of Han China provided an entry point for Buddhism.[21]

Despite the warfare and political confusion, more and more Indian Buddhist monks continued to arrive in China. Some, like Kumarajiva, travelled overland from Central Asia, Kashmir and northern India. Many others came by sea, often via the growing and increasingly sophisticated Buddhist communities of Java and Sumatra. These monks were celebrated for the magical skills they claimed to possess in rainmaking, exorcism, divination, miraculous treatments, foretelling of the future and their alleged knowledge of events happening at a distance. The charisma of these wonder-working holy men was believed to help win battles, relieve sickness and even assuage the pangs of guilt which occasionally overcame the plundering nomad chieftains.[22]

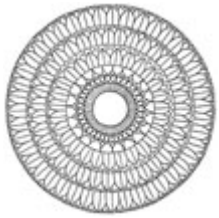
Through their missionary work, Buddhist thought, practices, art and imagery not only became part of the mainstream, competing with traditional Daoism and Confucianism, they also began to be a transformative force in Chinese intellectual life and started to exert influence on all aspects of Chinese thought, music and art. Indian ideas of astronomy, mathematics and medicine began to influence the study of both the heavens and the plotting of planetary movements and influences, as well as the workings of the human body. Chinese libraries began to fill with esoteric manuscripts such as *Drugs Advocated by the Various Rishis of the Western Regions* and *Important Prescriptions Collected by Famous Physicians of the Brahmin Countries*.[23]

At the same time, Chinese architects began to transform and elongate the domed Indian stupa into the many-tiered pagodas that would become such a defining feature of the Chinese landscape, while sculptors and artists began to blend ideas from both regions to introduce figurative art and the beginnings of Sino-Buddhist sculpture and scroll painting.[24] Here Chinese faces radiating compassion were grafted on to figures gesturing to the devotee in the sign language of the *mudras*, the ancient gestures of Indian dance. The Indian form of episodic picture recitation began to shape the narrative structure of Chinese fiction and drama, while Indian patterns of musical tones entered Chinese music.[25]

Before long, Buddhist doctrines and mystical ideas of the Buddhist universe had percolated through every level of Chinese society. In particular, Chinese concepts of time and space, of afterlives and heavens and

hells, all changed dramatically after the introduction of Buddhism and with it the raft of Indian ideas, concepts and assumptions that underpinned its philosophical system and helped shape the Buddhist understanding of the universe.

Slowly, South Asia found itself occupying a unique place in the Chinese world order. The dissemination of Buddhist doctrines and the idealised views of India that began to circulate around China created an image of South Asia as the spiritual holy land of Buddhism: a unique place outside the Middle Kingdom that was culturally and spiritually respected as the civilisational equal to China itself. The stage was set for an extraordinary moment of cultural transformation.[26]



By the fifth century, China was divided between north and south. In 386, the Khan Tuoba Gui had led his tribe of Turkic people over the Great Wall into Shanxi and founded a new and foreign dynasty, the Northern Wei, within the heartlands of northern China. His successors were converted to Buddhism by a Chinese monk, and Buddhism began to spread quickly among the Turks.

The Kingdom of the Northern Wei was the first state to elevate Buddhism to a state religion since the fall of the Kushans. Over the years that followed, the Turks conquered many of their neighbours, so consolidating their power, unifying much of northern China and turning the former Han cities of Chang'an and Luoyang into their capitals. Before long, the emperors of Wei had begun to build temples to their ancestors, practise Confucian rights, re-establish a Han-style bureaucracy and generally behave in as Chinese a way as possible.

Mahayana Buddhism was enthusiastically promoted, but it was also Sinicised. Early in their reign, the Northern Wei carved the Yungang Caves outside their first capital at Datong, as well as building a hundred monasteries; thousands of scholar monks and craftsmen moved north and westwards to take advantage of their patronage and protection. Later, they also built the even more grandiose Longmen Caves at their second capital of Luoyang, which they filled with a thousand Buddhist monasteries.[27]

In the giant, linear, attenuated statues of the Buddha that the Northern Wei ordered to be carved inside both these complexes, the distinction between the Buddhist saviour and the reigning emperor was deliberately muddied. Here the saviour was depicted with Turkic features but wearing traditional imperial Chinese robes, not the usual Indian gowns. The idea was to represent the Buddha's authority invested in the person of the Northern Wei emperor, who wielded both secular and religious authority, reinforcing the notion that the emperor and the Cosmic Buddha were ultimately one. These were the first giant Buddhas ever made and, combining Hellenistic, Iranian, Indian and Chinese elements, inspired those of Bamiyan in Afghanistan built under a rival Turkic Buddhist dynasty a few generations later.[28]

The rulers of north and south China alike were now ardent patrons of the Buddhist faith, making gifts of land to the monasteries and donating even their country mansions for use as retreats and hermitages. One Chinese monk recorded that at the height of the Northern Wei there were forty-seven 'great state monasteries', 839 built by royalty or the nobility and as many as 30,000 constructed by commoners. In the south Buddhism was also flourishing, but less dramatically than in the north, and the same chronicler estimated that south of the Yangtze there were 2,846 monasteries and 82,700 monks.[29]

This was about to change. In the sixth century, the south was unified by another pious Buddhist monarch, Emperor Wudi of the Liang (r.502–49). Wudi ingeniously used Buddhist rituals, magic and the legends associated with King Ashoka, along with the Indian concept of the *chakravartin-raja*, the 'Ruler Who Turns the Wheel of Law', to legitimise his rise to power. Well read, a poet and a builder of universities, he received Indian Buddhist missionaries and had their portable artworks copied. His extravagant patronage of monks and monasteries, as well as his relic collecting, stupa building and promotion of vegetarianism, became legendary.[30]

Known by the end of his reign as the Emperor Bodhisattva, Wudi banned the sacrifice of animals and almost all executions. He was renowned for his public displays of Buddhist piety: on one occasion he literally 'gave himself' as a slave to a Buddhist temple, requiring his ministers to 'ransom' him back. On the

Buddha's birthday in 504, he ordered his relatives, the nobles of the court and all officials to forsake Daoism and embrace the *dharma* of the Buddha.

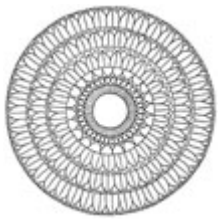
One of the Indian arrivals during his reign, at least according to the later legend, was a south Indian Buddhist monk named Bodhidharma, sometimes said to be a Pallava prince from Kanchipuram, south-west of Chennai. Bodhidharma is said to have arrived at the court of Wudi bringing the new Chan Buddhist teachings, and Indian Buddhist martial arts, with him. The audience, however, was not a success. After an ill-tempered appearance in the palace, when the eccentric Bodhidharma, then supposedly 150 years old, told the court that all the many imperial donations to Buddhist institutions were illusionary and had brought no merit at all, the warrior monk stormed off for northern China, allegedly crossing the Yangtze on a fragile reed.

Here he is said to have ended up in a small cave on Mount Song above the new Shaolin monastery where he perfected ancient Indian yogic self-protection techniques against wild animals, before immuring himself for nine years, which he spent in silent and motionless meditation, facing a wall. He remained so still that his shadow became imprinted on the cave, where, at least according to the faithful, it remained visible for centuries. Bodhidharma eventually emerged to become the first founding patriarch of Chinese Zen Buddhism.[31]

In Zen art, Bodhidharma is depicted as a large and powerful Indian fighting monk, with long beard, eyebrows and hair, swathed in a red robe and scowling angrily. The martial-arts teachings transmitted by him, including the use of the 'Bodhidharma Cane', a T-shaped cane, the bottom point of which is capped with a metal spike, were faithfully preserved by his followers in the celebrated Shaolin monastery. They were a mix of Indian and Chinese *gongfu* fighting techniques which eventually grew into the more familiar world of kung fu.

Bodhidharma's uncompromising teaching won him disciples and also some powerful enemies, and he was eventually said to have been poisoned by two rival monks. Soon after his apparent death, however, a startled Chinese emissary returning from India claimed to have met him wandering alone and barefoot, but carrying a single shoe, high on the Pamir plateau. When Bodhidharma's grave was opened, it was found to be empty – except for his other shoe.

This sighting led to the widely held belief that Bodhidharma was immortal, that his death had been only a ruse and that those who wished to learn Indian martial arts could instantly summon him through intense meditation.[32]



In 580–1 ce, General Yang Jian – the future Emperor Wen of the Sui dynasty (r.581–604) – seized the throne of the north, ordered the massacre of fifty-nine members of the family of his predecessor and proclaimed the beginning of the Sui dynasty. A tough, tall and imposing northern aristocrat, whose family had expediently intermarried with the incoming Turks, he had risen fast in the ranks of the army and had succeeded in seizing power through a mixture of energy, ruthlessness, tenacity and good luck.[33]

Before long he had begun building up an army of an unprecedented half a million men, as well as constructing granaries, canals and roads that would enable them to move en masse and at speed. He also began to create a massive river-based navy equipped with some of the most formidable vessels in Chinese naval history: five-decker Yellow Dragon warships which towered more than a hundred feet above the waterline, each deck bristling with portholes full of crossbow men, and equipped with six fifty-foot booms that could be swung to batter rival ships to pieces.

In 589, when his meticulous preparations were complete, the Emperor unleashed his fleet up the Yangtze into the Witches' Gorge, and launched a massive eight-pronged amphibious assault on the south of China. It was a brilliant success: within a few weeks he had captured the rival Emperor and successfully reunited the entire country for the first time since the fall of the Han dynasty 300 years earlier.[34]

Given his ruthlessness and talent for offensive warfare, Emperor Wen was perhaps an unlikely follower of the peaceful Buddhist way; but he turned out to be one of the most enthusiastic champions of the *dharma* in

Chinese history. He had actually been born in a Buddhist temple and brought up by a Buddhist nun, and his first act on coming to power was to order the building of Buddhist monasteries at the foot of each of the five sacred mountains of China. Later the same year he issued an additional decree that five more monasteries should be built at sites associated with his new royal family. He revoked restrictions against the Buddhist community, authorised the building of yet more new monasteries across the country and allowed the renovation of old ones. Each household in the country was required to make a contribution towards the casting of images and the copying of holy texts.[35] In 583, one Indian Buddhist monk, Narendrayashas, produced a series of translations from the Sanskrit in which he claimed that the Emperor was actually an incarnate Bodhisattva.

Before long, Emperor Wen was claiming that the Buddha had personally entrusted him with the task of reuniting and ruling China and that his successful campaigns were guided by his magical Buddhist powers. 'With the armed might of a *chakravartin* king,' he wrote, 'we spread the ideals of the ultimately Enlightened one. With a hundred victories in a hundred battles, we promote the practice of the ten Buddhist virtues. Therefore we regard the weapons of war as having become like the offerings of incense and flowers presented to the Buddha, and the fields of this world as becoming forever identical with the Buddha-land.'[36]

Moreover, the new Emperor understood the value of Buddhism as an ideology capable of healing the country and binding together the divisions which had deepened over three centuries of separation.

There was little love lost between the north and south, especially after the extreme violence of the conquest. The southerners looked on the northerners as semi-barbarous and likened their poetry to 'the braying of donkeys and the barking of dogs'. The northerners regarded the southerners as pathetically effete and fussy.[37] In an effort to pull together the disparate regions of his long-disunited kingdom, the Emperor began building canals and waterways and introduced a single administration for north and south. At the same time, in an imitation of Ashoka, he began to distribute Buddhist relics from the capital across his new realms, as if to create a web of spiritual protection to match the temporal defences he was also erecting.[38]

On three separate occasions the new Emperor sent out parties of thirty monks 'well versed in the Dharma and capable as proselytizers', each accompanied by two attendants and a secular official, to distribute Buddhist relics and build stupas in each prefecture to house them. A holiday was to be declared on the completion of each stupa and feasts were to be held to initiate them. A court historian was even commissioned to write about the miracles – the appearance of miraculous lights and inexplicable healings – which were reputed to accompany the relic distribution. By the end of his reign, Emperor Wen was said to have authorised the ordination of 230,000 monks and nuns, the construction of 3,792 monasteries, the copying of 132,086 sutra scrolls and the painting of 106,580 holy images.[39]

Buddhism had now become an all-pervasive feature of life at all levels of Chinese society. Buddhist shrines and monasteries were scattered across the landscape; the gilded finials of its temples and pagodas punctuated the city skylines. One could now not travel far anywhere in China without meeting grey-robed monks making their way to new Buddhist stupas; the tolling of temple bells and chanting of sutras were everywhere.

The Buddhist religious life of prayer and meditation had become a popular option for those who wished to withdraw from the world. The nunneries, some of them of great magnificence, became a place of retreat for aristocratic widows or for the palace women of a dead prince. Meanwhile folk Buddhism had made its way into the myriad bazaars of rural China, and a network of popular Buddhist caves and shrines began to pull in pious pilgrims across the rural hinterland.[40]

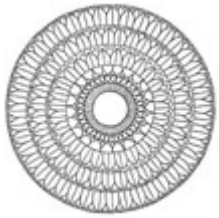
Before long, Indian monks were also making pilgrimages to the holy mountains, temples and stupas of China as word of their miraculous qualities began to circulate around the Buddhist world. The Diamond Grotto on Mount Wutai, in Shanxi, for example, became famous as the home of the Bodhisattva Manjushri and, from the sixth century onwards, began to attract a steady stream of devotees not just from China but from further afield. Some of these made the pilgrimage from Kashmir. Others came all the way from the site of the Buddha's Enlightenment at Bodh Gaya. The Middle Kingdom was slowly transforming into an extension of the Indian Buddhist holy land.[41]

If Indian Buddhist monks were increasingly regular and honoured visitors in the streets of the joint Chinese capitals, Chang'an and Luoyang, then Chinese monks were becoming equally familiar sights in Central Asia and India, particularly in the centres of Buddhist pilgrimage and learning such as Naw Bahar near Balkh, and the celebrated university monasteries of Bihar: Vikramashila, Odantapura, Somapura and, the greatest of them all, Nalanda.[42] Nalanda was then at its apex, the undisputed scholarly centre of the

Mahayana Buddhist world.

But, despite its powerful start, the Sui dynasty lasted only two generations. As it began to collapse in the early seventh century, barely two decades after its rise, a new dynasty emerged to take its place, the Tang, founded by a rebel Sui general named Li Yuan, and consolidated by his son who eventually took the title of Emperor Tang Taizong. One of the new Emperor's first edicts, intended to prevent banditry and issued soon after he captured Chang'an, was to close the roads to the west and to regard anyone who trespassed as an enemy of the state.

Among those who felt the effects of this early Tang edict was the learned monk Xuanzang.



After his request for a travel permit was denied, Xuanzang slipped out of Chang'an early one morning and began to trudge westwards.

After walking for 500 miles, he reached Liangzhou, where he decided to buy a horse. When he was spotted by the police bargaining in the bazaar, the local Governor hauled him in and ordered him to turn back. Xuanzang ignored the order and again slipped out of town before dawn to continue his journey westward, only for the Tang authorities to issue a formal warrant for his arrest. To avoid capture, the monk was forced to hide by day and travel only by night.

At Guazhou, he reached the edge of the Tarim basin; beyond it stretched 400,000 square miles of desert. This presented Xuanzang with a new problem. Watchtowers guarded the only springs. Riding through the desert wastes without a guide, guessing the way only by the trail of 'skeletons and horse dung', he arrived at the first spring.

> Fearing he might be seen by the watchmen, he hid himself in a sandy ditch and remained there until nightfall. Then he came to the West of the tower, where he saw water. He went down to have a drink and washed his hands and when he was about to refill his water bag, an arrow whizzed through the air and nearly hit his knee. A moment later another arrow was shot. Realizing that he had been seen, he said aloud, 'I am a monk from the capital. Don't shoot me!'[43]

The Captain in charge of the watchtower turned out to be a pious Buddhist and, though he had received the order to arrest Xuanzang, nevertheless decided to help him. He fed him, filled his water bag, gave him wheat cakes and advised him on where to find unguarded springs. He even led him on the first stage of the journey:

> Beyond this was the Moheyan Desert, which stretched for 800 li [about 250 miles]. There was no bird flying above, nor any beast roaming below; neither was there any water or grass. Now the Master had only his lonely shadow travelling with him, and all he could do was to repeat the name of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva … After he had travelled for more than a hundred li, he lost his way and could not find the Wild Horse Spring. When he took his water bag to have a drink, it was so heavy that it slipped from his hands and the water that was to sustain him during his journey was spilled all at once … For four days and five nights he had not a drop of water to moisten his throat, and his mouth and stomach became dried up.[44]

It was his horse that saved him. It 'suddenly changed course and would not turn back, though he pulled hard at the reins … A few li further on he caught sight of pasture [and beyond that] a pond of sweet and clean water.'[45]

From this point, Xuanzang found himself among the small Buddhist oasis kingdoms that lined the edge of the desert. For the next few hundred miles, the going became easier, as he was passed on from one Buddhist community to the next; on several occasions he was even called to the palace and honoured by the rulers of the oasis towns: 'the king, surrounded by his attendants in front and in rear, bearing lighted torches, came forth in person to meet him and ushered him to sit behind a precious curtain in a storeyed pavilion in the

inner court. The king worshipped him and asked about his journey in a very cordial manner.'[46]

Beyond, however, lay the Pamirs.

> The mountains were dangerously steep and so tall that they seemed to touch the sky. Since the creation of the world, they had been covered with ice and snow, which had accumulated and turned into glaciers and never melted in spring or summer. Cold mist mingled with the clouds, and when one looked up one could see only a vast whiteness without limit. Rockslides and avalanches lay across the road, rendering the rugged mountain path difficult to climb. One would tremble in the flurry of snowflakes even though one had put on double shoes and heavy fur coats. At the time of sleeping or eating there was no dry place to stop. One could only hang the pot to cook food and sleep on the ice … The path among the mountains was long and dangerous, but so narrow as to be passable by only one person at a time.[47]

Xuanzang trudged on, through the mountain passes of Central Asia, stopping first at Samarkand, then a major Zoroastrian centre, before moving on to Balkh. This was then home to one of the greatest Buddhist centres of learning, Naw Bahar, the 'New Monastery', where Xuanzang paused for some weeks to study the Sanskrit texts in the celebrated library, the finest in Central Asia. At the next halt, Bamiyan, Xuanzang left the first description to survive of the newly carved Buddhas which then lay at the centre of a bustling Buddhist monastic complex consisting of:

> ten monasteries and several thousand monks. They guided him with great hospitality so that he could see and worship all the places. To the northeast of the royal city, at the foot of the hill, there was a standing rock statue one hundred and fifty feet in height. To the east of the statue there was a monastery, and to the east of the monastery a standing bronze image of Shakyamuni Buddha, a hundred feet tall. Inside the monastery there was a recumbent image of the Buddha, a thousand feet in length, in the posture of entering nirvana. All these images were magnificently adorned.[48]

But as he tramped on into Gandhara, once one of the leading intellectual centres of the Buddhist world, home to Asanga, Vasubandhu and many of the most profound writers of the Mahayana and Yogacara traditions, Xuanzang began to realise, to his surprise and disappointment, that the closer he came to the Indian heartlands of Buddhism, the more wrecked and dilapidated the Buddhist holy places were becoming. Many had fallen into decay, 'overgrown with weeds'. In some of the greatest monasteries, all that was left were crumbling foundations, 'overturned and destroyed'. The further he went the more he found that it was Brahmanical Hinduism, not Buddhism, that was now the most flourishing faith. 'There are about one hundred deva temples, where various non-Buddhists dwell,' he wrote at one Gandharan holy site. 'The monasteries are now in desolation, and the number of monks has decreased.'[49]

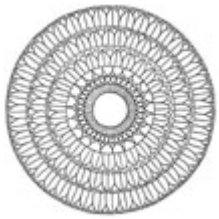
Xuanzang blamed one ruler in particular for the destruction of Buddhist monasteries. Mihirakula was a leader of the nomadic White Huns who had died in 542 ce, around a century before Xuanzang embarked on his pilgrimage. Xuanzang depicts him as the most feared enemy of the Buddhists and writes that he issued an edict to destroy all the Buddhist monasteries in India and 'overthrow the law of the Buddha'. According to Xuanzang, Mihirakula destroyed 1,600 monasteries in Gandhara alone, and had 9,000 monks killed or sold into slavery on the Indus.[50]

But there were other, less immediately visible causes of the decline of Xuanzang's beloved faith. Ever since the fall of the Mauryas, Buddhism had begun to lose its privileged position as the most favoured religion of India's rulers in north India.[51] The rise of the strongly Brahmanical Imperial Guptas in particular had led to the development and spread of a new type of Hinduism based on ideas that would take final shape in the Purana scriptures and which was focused not on Vedic sacrifices performed on temporary brick altars but on beautifully carved images.[52] Here the emphasis was now on intense devotion to tangible deities, especially Shiva, Vishnu and the Devi or Great Goddess. In the old Vedic rituals, prayers were sent up to the gods in heaven; now, in contrast, the deity was welcomed and worshipped down on earth. The gods were embodied as idols into which the Brahman priests invited the deity, and which were then enshrined in permanent stone temples so that worshippers could journey to meet the eyes of the god – have *darshan* – and give offerings and prayers, or *pujas*.

This was an innovation that was enormously popular among ordinary worshippers, but which also proved especially congenial to the rulers and warlords, who found the Puranic rhetoric glorifying warrior kingship

much more to their taste than the bloodless pacifism of Buddhism.[53] Moreover, it coincided with a time when in Gandhara and central India the monks of the Buddhist Sangha were increasingly withdrawing behind the walls of their monasteries and showing less and less interest in looking after the needs of lay Buddhists. The result was a slow haemorrhage of devotees and pilgrims from Buddhism to the new Hinduism, and a steady decline in patronage for the Buddhist monasteries and the Sangha.[54]

Buddhism in India would linger on for several centuries more, particularly in the north and the east, in the prosperous and culturally vibrant frontier regions of Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Kashmir, but also on the southern coast. But increasingly it was becoming a minority religion, existing in the shadow of its Hindu rival.[55] In many places in India, as Xuanzang was beginning to see the closer he got to the heartlands of the Gangetic plains, formerly Buddhist pilgrimage sites were being abandoned or taken over by Hindus or Jains. Only on the geographical fringes of South Asia did Buddhism continue to enjoy the support of rulers and a majority of the people.[56]



As Xuanzang passed into India near the border monastery of Hadda, to the west of Jalalabad, the danger from robbers and bandits seems to have markedly increased.

For safety, the monk now began to travel in a caravan of merchants, but he was still ambushed and robbed as he passed through Jammu. He managed to escape in the darkness and raise the alarm and as a result he lost only his possessions.

> Everybody wept piteously, except the Master who alone smiled without any feeling of grief. His fellow travellers asked him, 'All our clothes and travelling money have been stolen, and all that we have in our possession is our lives. How is it that you are in a happy mood?' The Master said in reply, 'What is most precious in existence is life. Since we still have our lives, what else should we worry about? The greatest treasure between Heaven and Earth is life. As we still possess our lives, we did not lose the great treasure. There is no need to grieve over such trifling matters as clothes and travelling money.'[57]

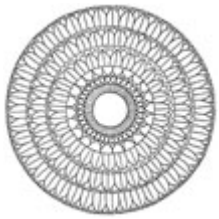
More serious trouble awaited him, however, as he entered the plains and caught a boat down the Ganges, along with eighty other passengers.

> When they had sailed for about a hundred li, they came to a place where there were dense and exuberant woods of Ashoka trees on both banks of the river. From the woods on each side of the river more than ten boatloads of pirates suddenly appeared at the same time and rowed against the current towards them. The people in the boat were terrified and in their confusion several men jumped into the river. The pirates compelled the boat to sail to the bank, and ordered the people to take off their clothes, in order to search for gems and jewels. Being worshippers of the Goddess Durga, the pirates used to find a handsome man of good quality in each Autumn season to be killed as a sacrifice to the deity so they could pray for happiness. Upon seeing that the Master was grand and handsome in appearance, they looked at each other with pleased expressions and said among themselves, 'The season of sacrifice [Durga Puja] is upon us … Isn't it auspicious for us to kill him as a sacrifice?'

The pirates began to construct a sacrificial altar in a flower-strewn glade in the wood. Xuanzang, showing no signs of fear, prepared himself for death and asked for permission to say his last prayers. He then began to meditate, visualising the Maitreya Buddha, and prayed to be reborn in Tusita heaven, where he would receive the Yogacara texts he had come all the way to India to find. Locked deep in his trance he was completely unaware of what was happening around him.

> All his fellow travellers wept and wailed aloud. In a moment, a gale of black wind rose from the four quarters, breaking down the trees and blowing sand high in the air. Waves rose in the river and boats were overturned. The pirates, greatly frightened, enquired of the travellers: 'Where does this monk

come from and what is his name?' They replied, 'He is the monk from China seeking the dharma. If your men kill him, you will commit a deadly sin. In view of the storm, we know the deity has been enraged. It befits you to make a quick repentance.' The pirates were fearful and begged for pardon with remorse, one after another. They prostrated themselves before the Master, but he was unconscious of them. Only when the pirates touched him with their hands, he opened his eyes, and [unaware of what had happened] said to them, 'Is it time now?'[58]



After six years of hard travel, Xuanzang was now approaching his goal. Moreover, he was now walking on the very roads that the Buddha had walked. Every day he found himself passing through the holy places of Buddhism that he had read about since his childhood: Sravasti, site of a great miracle where the Buddha multiplied himself so as to appear simultaneously in the different terrestrial and celestial abodes; Sarnath, site of the First Sermon; the ruins of Patna/Pataliputra, where Ashoka had converted to Buddhism; Kapilavastu, where the Lady Maya had given birth to the Buddha, but whose bedchamber was now 'deserted and in ruins'; Bodh Gaya, where the Buddha had achieved his Enlightenment, though Xuanzang was appalled to discover that the huge tree under which the Buddha had meditated was no longer there as 'wicked kings have cut it down and destroyed it; the tree is now only fifty feet high'.[59]

Finally, ten days after he arrived in Bodh Gaya, a delegation of four monks arrived to see him. They were from Nalanda and had heard that a great Buddhist scholar had come all the way from China to study with them. They were there, they said, to escort him to the Venerable Silabhadra, who was awaiting his arrival.

As Xuanzang approached the great monastery university, after six years of adventures, 200 monks and 1,000 lay supporters came out to greet him, 'holding banners, canopies, flowers and incense [burners]'. This was a quite exceptional welcome, as Nalanda was celebrated for being as picky as any modern Oxbridge or Ivy League college. The institution refused to admit any would-be scholar to its brotherhood unless he had first undergone a thorough examination. 'Many are denied entrance,' wrote Xuanzang, with a touch of pride. 'Most of the people from different regions and countries who desire to enter this monastery to hold discussions are barred from entering the establishment after a preliminary examination by the gatekeeper. Only brilliant scholars who possess wide knowledge of things ancient and modern are permitted to enter.'[60]

Even Xuanzang, the most accomplished Chinese scholar of his day, entered the hallowed portals of Nalanda on his knees. In accordance with local rites, as he approached the Venerable Silabhadra 'with the utmost veneration he crawled on his knees and elbows, kissed the teacher's feet and prostrated himself to pay homage to him'.[61] When Xuanzang looked up, however, he saw that Silabhadra was weeping. The elderly teacher then called his nephew, the monk Buddhabhadra, to reveal the reason why.

Three years earlier, he explained, Silabhadra had been engaged on a fast when he had a vision of 'three heavenly beings. The first was the colour of gold. The second was the colour of lapis lazuli, and the third was the colour of silver.' They revealed themselves to be the Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara, Manjushri and Maitreya, who then made a prophecy: 'There is a monk from China who takes pleasure in the great Dharma and who wants to study with you. Wait for him to arrive and then teach him.'[62]

On hearing that his pilgrimage had been predicted by the Bodhisattva Manjushri himself, Xuanzang was overcome. Nothing had prepared him for such a welcome, nor had he expected the scale or magnificence of the greatest and most celebrated Buddhist monastery of its day. 'Because the entire complex was constructed by kings of successive dynasties,' he wrote, 'the buildings were erected by the most exquisitely skilled carpenters employing rare tools such as curved chisels making the complex a really magnificent site.' It was his biographer Huili who left the fullest description:

Six kings built as many monasteries around the site, one after the other, and an enclosure was made with bricks to merge them all into one monastery with one common entrance. There were separate courtyards, divided into eight departments. Precious terraces ranged like stars in the sky and jade storeyed pavilions spired like lofty peaks. The temples stood high in the mist, and the shrines hovered

over the rosy clouds. Breeze and fog rose from the doors and windows and the sun and moon shone alternately at the eaves of the building. Moreover, brooks of clear water rippled through the compounds with blue lotuses and water lillies growing inside them. The flowers of sandalwood trees glowed inside the enclosure, and outside it there was a dense mango orchard.

All the monks' chambers in the different departments had four storeys. The ridgepoles were carved with little dragons, the beams were painted all the colours of the rainbow, and green struts contrasted with the crimson pillars. The frontal columns and railings had ornamental engravings and hollowed-out carvings. The plinths were made of jade, and the tips of the rafters were adorned with drawings. The ridges of the roofs stood high in the sunlight, and the eaves were connected with ropes from which hung coloured silk pendants. In India there were thousands of monasteries, but this was the most magnificent and sublime of them all.[63]

Xuanzang progressed on into the heart of the *mahavihara*, or great monastery, where he performed an emotional circumambulation of the sutra library, a round, stupa-like structure at the centre of the complex.[64] He then took a tour round the lecture halls, stupas, five temples and the successive courtyards full of 300 individual apartments which housed the 10,000 monks and scholars gathered there.[65] Between them they studied the texts of the different schools of Mahayana and Nikaya Buddhism, as well as the Vedas, logic, Sanskrit grammar, philosophy, medicine, metaphysics, divination, mathematics, astronomy, literature and magic.[66]

'The priests, to the number of several thousands, are men of the highest ability and talent,' wrote Xuanzang. 'Their distinction is very great at the present time. The rules of this convent are severe and all the priests are bound to observe them … The day is not sufficient for asking and answering profound questions. From morning until night they engage in discussions; the old and the young mutually help each other.'[67] Lectures were given in a hundred different halls each day 'and the students studied diligently without wasting a single moment. All the monks who lived there were men of virtue and the atmosphere of the monastery was naturally solemn and dignified.'[68]

The logistics of running such a major institution were daunting. Xuanzang's arrival in India happened to coincide with the establishment of a vast empire across north India by King Harsha, an extraordinary and intellectually curious ruler of relatively humble mercantile origins. His father had successfully fought off the Huns; as a result, Harsha's kingdom now extended all the way from Bengal to the Indus, bringing peace, prosperity and centralised rule to the region for the first time since the fall of the Guptas and the first invasions of the Huns a century earlier.[69]

Though Harsha was himself a Hindu, and had recently established a forerunner of the great Kumbh Mela on the banks of the Ganges, he was also a generous patron to the Buddhists, especially those of Nalanda to whom he had given an enormous brass image as well as more than a hundred villages as an endowment.[70] It was the headmen of these villages who were responsible for supplying provisions to the scholar monks. Two hundred families in each village were tasked with providing daily cartloads of rice, milk and butter. Xuanzang records that as an honoured guest he was daily provided, without charge, with twenty betel leaves, areca nuts and nutmegs, over an ounce of fine incense, almost a pint of rice, and an unlimited supply of butter and milk. He was also provided with two servants and an elephant to help him get around.[71]

Many students and teachers had come from far away to study in the greatest centre of learning of its day. As well as China, we know the names of monks who came to Nalanda from Nepal, Tibet, Sri Lanka, Sumatra and even Korea.[72] Indeed, a little after Xuanzang one entire monastery college was built and endowed by the passionately Buddhist 'Lords of the Mountains', the Sailendra rajas of far-distant Indonesia, who were probably also responsible for building the largest Buddhist temple ever built, Borobudur, which still stands, almost completely intact, in the eastern highlands of Java. One slightly later Chinese pilgrim talks of a Chinese college being established at the monastery.[73] It was probably the influence of Nalanda that has resulted in inscriptions carved in Siddhamatrika, a north-eastern Indian script native to the area of Nalanda, turning up as far away as China and Japan. Indeed one scholar has gone as far as suggesting that Nalanda 'was the cultural centre that dictated the predominant religious and aesthetic paradigm across the entire Buddhist world from the 8th to the 13th century'. It also played a major role in transmitting esoteric Buddhism to Tibet.[74]

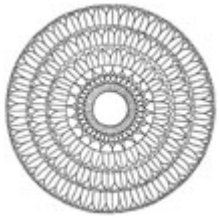
The biggest draw of all, in the centre of the complex, was the Nalanda library. According to the later

Tibetan monk Taranatha, the Nalanda sutra depository – quite possibly the greatest library in the world after the destruction of Alexandria – was named the Dharmaganja. It was nine storeys high and contained three divisions: the Ratnadadhi, the 'Sea of Jewels', the Ratnasagara, the 'Ocean of Jewels', and the Ratnaranjaka, the 'Jewel-Adorned'. Any manuscript could be borrowed, though Nalanda regulations held that it must be stored in the niche in the monks' cells next to the square central courtyard.[75]

Here it was that Xuanzang studied under the 'great scholar and incomparable metaphysican' Silabhadra. In the course of three years' intense study, Silabhadra revealed to Xuanzang the hidden secrets of the mystical philosophy of the Yogacara. In return, according to the Nalanda system, disciples were expected to look after their gurus, massaging them, folding their clothes and cleaning their cells.

It was a well-regulated routine, designed to enhance the life of study and prayer. Water clocks kept track of the time and gongs were beaten to announce the hours of prayer and study. Each morning Xuanzang was awoken in his ten-by-ten-foot cell around the central cloister by the great drum. There were pools outside for his ablutions, after which he sometimes attended lectures; at other times he gave lectures himself.[76]

Each evening, after a service of chanting, Xuanzang would sit up late copying the Sanskrit manuscripts that he wished to take back to China. By the end of the five years he had acquired copies of his own quite substantial library of rare Indian texts to take home with him.



Xuanzang now looked to Silabhadra as his master and Nalanda as his alma mater; but such was his determination to access the fullness of Buddhist learning in India that he refused to leave the region before seeing all its most important pilgrimage sites, and searching for other masters who might have preserved crucial parts of Buddhist tradition.

After five years at Nalanda, Xuanzang set off on a loop of the peninsula, visiting the major Buddhist centre of Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu where refugees dissuaded him from attempting to continue his pilgrimage as planned to the Yogacara masters of Sri Lanka, then locked in a bitter civil war. Instead he made a loop up the Indian west coast, stopping off to visit the celebrated monastery of Ajanta. In 641 he returned to Nalanda, where he spent a further two years studying the finer points of Sanskrit grammar and resolving his final queries about Yogacara. It was then that he received a vision of the Bodhisattva Manjushri who warned him that on the death of King Harsha northern India would descend into civil war and Nalanda would be attacked and burned. It was time for him to leave, warned the Bodhisattva.

In 643, after more than a decade in India, Xuanzang made one last expedition – this time eastwards to the monasteries of Bengal – before finally announcing his intention to return to China. 'I have visited and adored the sacred vestiges of our religion,' he said, 'and heard the profound expositions of the various schools. I have had the honour to attend lectures on the Yogacarabhumi Sastra, whereby my net of doubts has been resolved. My mind has been overjoyed, and my visit here has been of the utmost profit. I desire now to go back and translate and explain to others what I have heard.'[77]

Xuanzang's colleagues at Nalanda were baffled. 'India is the land of the Buddha's birth,' they replied,

> and though he has left this world, there are many traces of him. What greater happiness could there be than to visit them in turn, to adore him and chant his praises? Why then do you wish to leave, having come so far? Moreover, China is a country of *mlecchas*, unimportant barbarians. That is why the Buddha was not born there. The mind of the people there is narrow, and their coarseness profound, hence neither saints nor sages go there. The climate is cold and the country rugged. Think again.[78]

But Xuanzang's mind was made up. Before he left, he was summoned to a debate by the great King Harsha, who was now at the climax of his reign. The two had already met. At their first audience, the King had closely questioned Xuanzang about China and its ruler, and surprised the monk by his knowledge of affairs beyond the Himalayas. This second meeting seems to have opened a major diplomatic initiative: in the years that followed, many embassies passed between Kannauj and Chang'an, each carrying a caravan of

diplomatic presents, including a precious sapling of the Bodhi tree of Bodh Gaya which Harsha sent as a gift to the Emperor Taizong, along with a small library of Buddhist medical and astronomical texts.[79]

At the debate which followed Xuanzang's audience, the monk distinguished himself against an atheist philosopher, as well as against Theravada Buddhist monks who accused the Mahayana monks of Nalanda of being ivory-tower 'sky flower' heretics who believed all was illusion. According to Huili, Xuanzang's eloquence saw off both opponents, exposing their inconsistencies in front of the King.[80]

The following year Xuanzang finally began the dangerous two-year return journey with his precious caravan full of ancient Buddhist texts, all of which were then unknown in China. It was now sixteen years since he had set off from Chang'an. He left in a very different style to that in which he had arrived. A local ruler provided the funds to ensure the safety of the return expedition across Central Asia, carrying 657 books bound in 520 cases, plus a large collection of statues and relics, each of which would in time become a shrine of its own in China. Xuanzang also packed a collection of saplings, cuttings and seeds. Not only did this mean he had over a hundred porters, guards, seventy-two horses and other assorted pack animals to carry his relics and manuscripts, he himself was riding upon an elephant provided by King Harsha, who had also rewarded him with a full purse and four officials armed with diplomatic letters asking for free passage and fresh horses from the rulers whose lands he was crossing.[81]

Only one disaster marred the return journey. When he reached the Indus, the monk lost some of the most precious of his manuscripts when a monsoon storm broke just as he was about to make the crossing, probably at Attock. Xuanzang himself made it safely across on his elephant, but a gale sprang up as the boats full of manuscripts followed, overturning several small craft. The boatmen were all saved, but fifty invaluable manuscripts were washed away in the torrent, along with several containers of seeds. Xuanzang was aghast and spent many years writing letters to his friends in India trying in vain to replace what he had lost.[82]

In late 644, when the caravan reached the Buddhist oasis city of Khotan on the southern edge of the Taklamakan desert, he took the precaution of writing the Emperor Taizong a letter in which he apologised for leaving the country illegally, but laid out all he had achieved and hinted how useful his knowledge could be to the Emperor.

> I accomplished a journey of more than 50,000 li; yet notwithstanding the thousand differences of customs and manners I have witnessed, the myriad dangers I have encountered, by the goodness of Heaven I have returned without accident, and now offer my homage to the Tang emperor with a body unimpaired, and a mind satisfied with the accomplishment of my vows. I have worshipped at the Bodhi tree: I have seen traces not seen before; heard sacred words not heard before; witnessed spiritual prodigies exceeding all the wonders of nature.[83]

Xuanzang need not have worried. A reply arrived at the monastery where he was staying. 'We are extremely happy to hear that the master is coming back after seeking the Way in foreign lands,' wrote the Emperor.

> He may come speedily to see us. Let him bring back those foreign monks who understand the Sanskrit language and the meanings of the scriptures. We have already instructed the authorities of Kustana and other countries, asking them to escort the master, so that porters and horses may not be lacking. The governor of Dunhuang has also been ordered to receive the master in the desert and the governor of Shanshan will receive him at the Jumo River.[84]

At dawn on 8 February 645 ce, thousands of people as well as entire monasteries of monks and nuns lined the streets to welcome Xuanzang home to the capital he had left so furtively sixteen years earlier. He was escorted first to the Hongfu Monastery and a fortnight later, on 23 February, was granted an audience by the Emperor Taizong himself at his palace in Luoyang.[85]

Buddhists had not always been so popular or as welcome at court, particularly with their Daoist and Confucian competitors. In the 620s the Grand Astrologer and Daoist priest Fu Yi had presented a petition asking for the suppression of the religion of 'the barbarian Buddha':

> [Before him] there were no barbarian deities within the emerald seas … [but since the introduction of Buddhism] the evil barbarians flourished and multiplied. The people listened to the dissolute language

> of the evil barbarians, warped like the singing of frogs, and in listening to it, the root of Confucianism was lost … Crowds of barbarian monks dazzle the eyes and ears of innocent folk … In the Western regions, barbarians are born from mud. Therefore they naturally worship pagodas and statues made from mud and tiles.[86]

Such attitudes were once not uncommon. But while Xuanzang was away the new Emperor Taizong had consolidated the power of the Tang dynasty with the aid of the Buddhist Shaolin fighter monks. In recognition of this, at his inauguration he invited Buddhist monks to the Imperial Palace to conduct a seven-day service which included the ordination of 3,000 monks. He had not always shown much interest in Buddhism in the years since, but now he greeted Xuanzang like a returning hero, personally going out to meet him at the city limits amid great fanfare.[87]

In the months that followed, the Emperor questioned the monk closely on his travels, asking about the climate, products and customs of India, and even invited him to join the government; but Xuanzang declined, tactfully pointing out that he lacked the Confucian training required of government officials.[88] Instead he retired to Chang'an, where he settled in a royal monastery and on the Emperor's instructions began writing his celebrated memoir of his Indian journey, *Records of the Western World*, which quickly became the most important reference work in China for knowledge about India. The text so intrigued Taizong that he initiated a series of diplomatic missions to India that had both spiritual and political components: not only was Nalanda honoured with gifts from the Emperor, but the Chinese envoys began to discuss with Indian rulers ways of keeping in check the rising power of Tibet. Indian technology for making sugar from sugarcane was also brought back to China.[89]

Xuanzang meanwhile established a Centre for Sutra Translation within his monastery with a team of assistants that he recruited specially with the Emperor's patronage: twelve versifiers, nine stylists, a philologist and a specialist in Indian languages and literature. He also successfully petitioned the Emperor for a Nalanda-like Tower of Sanskrit Scriptures to protect the manuscripts he had brought back with him. The result was the Great Wild Goose Pagoda, a 210-foot-tall spectacular sutra library that still stands in the centre of Xi'an today.[90] The Emperor gave instructions that Xuanzang should be provided with whatever financial assistance he required.

In his last years, Xuanzang was appointed abbot of the Chang'an monastery and played an important role in bringing Buddhism more thoroughly into Chinese court life.[91] His greatest ally in this process was somewhat unexpected: a humble, fifth-ranking concubine who had just joined the imperial harem and who had already caught the eye of the Emperor Taizong around the time of Xuanzang's return.

There was still little evidence of what was to come, but the concubine would change everything, both for Xuanzang and for the standing of Buddhism in China. The alliance of Xuanzang and the future Empress Wu Zetian would in time transform Buddhism into the Chinese state religion and bring Buddhism to greater influence than it had ever previously achieved at the Chinese court. It also brought Indian and Chinese thought into closer alignment than at any other period of history. Never again would India have such influence at the heart of the Chinese world.

The Fifth Concubine

5

Some time in 624 ce, a baby girl was born to a timber merchant in the mountains of Sichuan in south-west China. Her family nickname was Huagu, or ‘Flower Girl’.

Just as Greek mythology sought to explain the extraordinary beauty of Helen of Troy by giving her a partly divine parentage, so the legends of Sichuan bring an element of the supernatural into stories of the girl’s conception. These strove to explain the uniquely formidable reputation of the future Empress Wu Zetian – the only woman who became emperor in her own right in 3,000 years of Chinese history.[1]

According to tales that are still told in the mountains around Lizhou, Wu Zetian’s mother, the Lady Yang (579–670 ce), was boating in the Jialing river when a black dragon surged out of the water. She fell unconscious; when she came to, the Lady Yang told of a vision in which she had made passionate love to the dragon. Nine months later, she gave birth to a demigod: the daughter of a heavenly dragon descended to earth. This was a version of her parentage that the future Empress approved of and later did much to propagate. Indeed at the nearby temple of Huangze, a statue of Wu Zetian is still worshipped as a deity.[2]

Outside the world of myth, the baby girl was recognised as the daughter of Wu Shiyue (577–635 ce), a rich and ambitious lumber merchant of aristocratic descent. The future Empress was born relatively late in her father’s life when the merchant, then around fifty years old, had already become both a successful entrepreneur and the governor of two provinces. But Wu Shiyue was not just wealthy; he was also an astute politician and had correctly judged the way the winds of state were blowing. He had encouraged the Tang to rise up against the failing Sui dynasty, then gained a reputation as a firm Tang loyalist throughout the ensuing Civil War. He had put his considerable wealth at the service of the rising Tang forces, and personally assisted in their capture of the capital. On their victory, he was rewarded by being made President of the Board of Works and the Duke of Ying.

In 620, he was presented by the Emperor with an aristocratic second wife: the Lady Yang, who was a cousin of the deposed Sui Emperor. Three daughters were born from the marriage, of whom the second, born in 624, was Wu Zetian. The girls travelled with their father around his various official appointments. Both parents were pious Buddhists. There still survive the inscriptions they had carved for the Buddhist images they gifted to temples, as well as a dragon-topped stele recording their patronage of an entire set of Buddhist caves near Lizhou.[3]

Wu Shiyue died when Wu Zetian was only ten, and his widow and daughters found themselves alone and without protection. But word spread of the Flower Girl's astonishing beauty, and as a reward for her father's loyalty the child was invited to the capital to enter the imperial harem at the age of only thirteen.[4]

The orphaned provincial was given the lowly rank of concubine of the fifth grade, with the title *Cairen* or 'Talent'. Her duties were to administer the imperial wardrobe as dresser of the elderly Emperor and to keep inventories of its linen. She seems to have quickly caught the eye of the ailing Emperor, who gave her the nickname 'Enchanting Miss Wu'; but there is no evidence that she ever slept with Taizong, even though that was certainly a possibility for any of the women posted to the imperial bedchamber.[5]

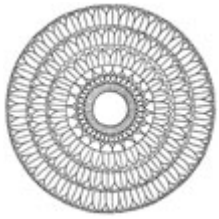
What is certain is that Enchanting Miss Wu came into close and probably intimate contact with the Crown Prince, Gaozong. This occurred during Taizong's final illness, when the heir apparent moved in to share the palace with his ailing father.[6] A hostile court poet who later took up arms against her accused the future Empress of 'taking advantage of changing dress to enter the service' of the heir apparent while his father still lived.[7] For the Crown Prince to have had a liaison with one of his father's women would not only have been taboo, it would also have been extremely dangerous for both Prince and concubine. If true, it provides early evidence for the young lady-in-waiting's steely ambition, bravery and determination.[8]

It was probably in this crucial period that Wu Zetian first met the monk Xuanzang, with whom Taizong spent many of his final months. The Emperor had always been a practical military man and had never shown much interest in matters of religion or philosophy; his generous patronage of the Daoists in the court was probably as much a function of his alleged descent from the founding Daoist sage Laozi as any religious conviction.[9]

But in the spring of 648, as his physical condition worsened following what sounds like a stroke, the Emperor retired to the Jade Flower Palace in the mountains north of Chang'an, and it was to this retreat that he summoned Xuanzang. As the Emperor lay on his sickbed the two discussed religion and the texts which Xuanzang had brought back from India and was now busy translating. The monk dazzled Taizong with his tales of travel and his descriptions of the wondrous part-Buddhist civilisation he had witnessed in India. Taizong asked for copies of Xuanzang's translations and, having read them, said that he regretted that his life had been so busy with politics and warfare that he had not been able to study Buddhism in as much depth as he would have wished.

In the last six months of his life, the failing Emperor formally accepted Xuanzang as his spiritual mentor, expressing remorse that he had not done so before. He even offered to write a preface to Xuanzang's translations and was reported to be considering giving Buddhist monks precedence over Daoists in court ceremonies. Xuanzang's biography claims that during this period the monk was able to work on his translations only after dark, as his days were now filled with long discussions with the Emperor on metaphysical matters.[10]

An Indian Brahmin doctor newly arrived from Kannauj with a returning Chinese embassy also attended upon the Emperor; but despite his claims to be 200 years old and to know the secret of herbal elixirs of longevity, his mercury-based concoctions only seemed to hasten Taizong's demise.[11] In the sixth month of 649 the Emperor's condition suddenly worsened. Xuanzang moved into the palace and, as Taizong neared the end, the traveller monk was close by his side, chanting his mantras. But despite the prayers and the power of Xuanzang's much venerated Buddhist relics, Taizong continued to sink. He was dead before the end of the month.[12]



The death of Taizong came as a major blow to both Xuanzang and Wu Zetian.

For Xuanzang, it came before he had succeeded in getting the Emperor to agree in principle to promote Buddhists over their Daoist rivals at court. For Wu Zetian, the death was a more existential threat. According to custom, all the childless concubines of the dead emperor were banished from the palace and sent off to a nunnery to live the rest of their cloistered lives in prayer and contemplation. Their heads were shaven and they were expected to exchange the silks of imperial concubines for the rough hessian cassocks

of Buddhist nuns. This was clearly not an option that appealed to the then 24-year-old Wu Zetian.[13]

On the first anniversary of Taizong's death, the new Emperor Gaozong visited the temple and saw the distraught and weeping Wu in the attached nunnery. She made a desperate appeal to her (probable) former lover, begging him to save her from a life of penance. She also presented him with a poem:

> I look upon your disc of jade and my thoughts scatter in disarray,
> As, haggard from grief, sundered and separated,
> I so keenly miss my Sovereign.
> If you don't believe this endless litany of tears,
> Then open my chest and examine my tear-stained pomegranate dress.[14]

Gaozong, who had already developed a deep passion for Wu Zetian, needed little persuasion. Before long Wu was back in the palace as a concubine of the second grade, with a new title, 'Lady of Luminous Demeanour'. Accounts vary as to how exactly this happened. According to the one source, her quick return was facilitated by the Empress, the Lady Wang, who had recently become jealous of another of Gaozong's concubines and aimed to replace her with a pliable young woman dependent on her favour. If so, it was a misreading of Wu she would soon come to regret: the Empress Wang, to satisfy her jealousy, 'had loosed a tiger on the mountain'.[15]

It is difficult to know the truth about much of Wu Zetian's life as the histories she herself commissioned were deliberately destroyed after her death, and the later Confucian sources for her reign are strongly biased against her. After her fall, she was subjected to a bitter campaign of vilification by the historians of the resurgent Confucian establishment. These histories associate her with a variety of terrible crimes and accuse her of breathtaking cruelty and vindictiveness, especially during her rise to power. At this distance it is impossible to distinguish the truth from gossip and outright slander. But the outlines of the story are plainly evident: Wu Zetian was clearly an unusually acute, intelligent and decisive woman. Equally clearly, she was manipulative, ruthless and increasingly murderous as she drew closer and closer to absolute power. Her rise left in its wake a graveyard full of bodies, many of which showed signs of terrible torture.[16]

Thanks partly to the influence of Gaozong's Empress, the Lady Wang, Wu Zetian re-entered the Emperor's bedchamber and quickly established herself as a permanent fixture in the young Emperor's bed. By the end of 652, she had borne him the first two of their six children. With the first, she had asked Xuanzang to pray for a safe delivery and to confer divine protection on her and her child. In return, she presented him with a silk stole, asked him to name the child – the monk chose 'Prince of the Buddha's Light' – and put the boy under the elderly monk's spiritual care and tutelage.[17]

Wu Zetian then mounted a campaign to discredit both the haughty and unpopular Empress Wang and the former favourite concubine, Xiao Liangdi. She is said to have bribed servants and other rival concubines to spy on them and then disparaged them both to the increasingly besotted Emperor. According to some sources, she then smothered her own newborn daughter in order to frame the childless Empress, who used to delight in playing with the child.[18] Whatever the truth, within a few months both Empress and concubine had been deposed, degraded to the status of commoners and imprisoned in the inner palace. The coffin of the Empress's father was unearthed and broken to bits. His family were executed and driven into exile.[19]

Wu was established as principal consort, but she wanted more. She began to lobby to be made empress in place of the Lady Wang, despite fierce ministerial opposition. It was pointed out that her father was a mere lumber merchant; moreover, she had been a concubine of Taizong, so her connection with his son was legally incestuous and could only blacken his reputation in the eyes of posterity. Either of these circumstances would normally have blocked Wu Zetian's advance to the throne irretrievably. But the imperial couple would brook no opposition. On the nineteenth day of the tenth month of 655, Wu got her way and was formally enthroned as empress at the age of thirty-one.[20] On the first day of the following year, her position was entrenched when her son was recognised as heir apparent.

The Empress celebrated the investiture by presiding over a vegetarian feast for 5,000 Buddhist monks. Xuanzang, who recognised the Empress as a powerful champion of Buddhism, persuaded the new Emperor to erect a stele to mark the occasion, and composed the inscription himself. It was carried through the capital in a grand procession led by the now elderly and much celebrated traveller monk and watched by a crowd said in the sources to have numbered one million.[21]

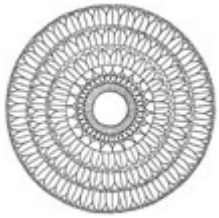
On 16 November 655, the new Empress moved on her former rivals. Both were sentenced to death for having murdered her child as well as for a supposed plot to poison the Emperor and to kill him through

black magic – something that, even at the time, was regarded as a gratuitously fabricated charge. When the sentence was read out to both women, the former Empress bowed several times, saying 'Long Life to His Majesty.' The former Chief Concubine was less forbearing. She screamed bitter curses at Wu and added, 'Wu is a treacherous fox who has brought me to this. I pray that in my future lives I shall return as a cat, and Wu will be a mouse, and then from life to life I shall tear her throat out.' The Empress ordered that no cats henceforth should be kept in any of her palaces.[22]

The punishment for witchcraft was appallingly brutal. First, the two women were severely beaten by executioners. Then their feet and hands were cut off. They were then thrown, bound, into a half-filled vat of wine. The exultant new Empress remarked, 'Now these witches can get drunk to their bones.' After several days of agony, the two victims died; their corpses were decapitated and cut to pieces.

The weak and pliable Emperor Gaozong looked on apparently powerless in the face of the determination of his new Empress, openly weeping for his first wife, but afraid to step in and save her.[23] Even the Empress Wu seems to have suffered some pangs of guilt, as she quickly began to press for the court to move to Luoyang, allegedly to free herself of the bloody apparitions of her two royal victims who were said to pay her nightly visits in her palace in Chang'an, in a striking Tang precursor of Lady Macbeth's nightmares.[24]

By the end of 659, five ministers who had attempted to block Wu's rise to power had also been driven to disgrace in the provinces, while one, the Chief Councillor, had committed suicide. From this point, regular ministerial purges began. Of the forty-six chief ministers who served between 684 and 693, half ended their life by suicide or execution, and three-quarters had their vocations suddenly terminated either by violence or by exile. By the end of her reign, Wu had forcibly removed no less than 80 per cent of her chief ministers. 'Frank speech was avoided,' wrote one contemporary. 'No one dared to oppose the imperial will or strongly demonstrate. For almost twenty years it was like this.'[25]



After establishing herself on the throne, the Empress initially kept a relatively low profile, going out of her way to appear humble, modest and supportive of her husband.[26] She did not appear publicly at her husband's audiences, nor did she insist on appointing her relatives to senior positions. Her influence was worked invisibly from behind the scenes. This changed, however, in October 660 when the Emperor Gaozong suffered a major paralytic stroke which left him incapacitated and partially blind. The young Empress quickly installed herself as de facto regent.[27]

As Gaozong complained of feeling dizzy and disorientated, often retiring to his bed, the Empress took firm charge. For the first time she attended public audiences, initially from behind a curtain, advising her husband and making joint decisions. It was an unprecedented arrangement.[28] As one slightly later court historian put it:

> From this event onwards, whenever the Emperor attended to business, the Empress then hung a curtain [and listened] behind it. There was no matter of government, great or small, which she did not hear. The whole power of the empire passed into her hands; reward and punishment, life and death, she decided. The Emperor just folded his hands and that is all. In court and country, they were called the Two Sages.[29]

In the years that followed his stroke, the Emperor showed an increasing interest in Daoism, partly in the hope of finding a Daoist cure for his ailments, possibly in the form of an elixir of longevity. At the same time, Wu Zetian began to use the resources now at her command to patronise Buddhism, in the manner of her maternal forebear, the Sui Emperor Wen. She initially showered her patronage especially on the Famen Temple in Chang'an, which held the revered relic of the Buddha's finger and for which she commissioned an image of Ashoka with the features of her husband Gaozong.[30]

By the end of her reign in 705, Chang'an alone had over 150 huge Buddhist monasteries and convents. Each was appointed with splendid buildings, elegant pavilions and shady courtyards, all decorated by the

most gifted artists and architects of the age. One Confucian official complained that 'present day temples surpass even the imperial palaces in design, embodying the last word in extravagance, splendour, artistry, and finesse'.[31] Luoyang was not far behind as a centre of Buddhist monasticism. Thanks to Wu's patronage many of these monasteries were major landholders too, earning income through their produce as well as through commercial activities such as managing oil presses, mills and even pawnshops.[32]

The Empress also built an elaborate grotto dedicated to the Buddha's mother Maya at the flourishing Buddhist pilgrimage site of Mount Wutai in Shanxi. This was believed to be the dwelling place of Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, and the Empress further paid for the refurbishment of the existing temples there.[33] A later Japanese pilgrim, the monk Ennin, noted that five of the esoteric images of the Buddha in the Jinge Monastery on Mount Wutai were modelled on images from Nalanda, possibly based on the statues brought from there by Wu Xuanzang.[34]

Wu Zetian also began to commission, on the Indian model, ambitious new excavations at the Buddhist cave complex of Dunhuang, on the edge of the Taklamakan desert, and more ambitiously still at Longmen, outside the capital Chang'an. In the course of her reign more than 380 vast and imposing images were carved out of the towering sandstone cliffs of Longmen. All were sculpted, and then frescoed, in the vigorous yet exquisitely naturalistic and sensual new Tang style which borrowed from Indian Gupta and Pala innovations and which the Empress helped to champion in her dominions. Her remarkable patronage led to a period of unprecedented creativity in Chinese Buddhist art.[35]

Her greatest commission was a stunning, colossal fifty-five-foot-high image of Vairocana Buddha, Lord of the Universe and the Primordial Principle behind all that exists. It was one of the first extant images of this deity, who was unknown in China until his existence was revealed by the Tantric Buddhist texts brought from Nalanda to China by Xuanzang; indeed Xuanzang may also have brought back the iconographic sketches which formed the basis for the sculpture.[36]

The image dominates the outdoor amphitheatre of the Fengxian theatre overlooking the Yi river at the centre of the Longmen complex. There are clear parallels between Vairocana Buddha's place in the Buddhist universe – lording it over all the many Buddhas in existence – and Wu Zetian's increasingly central place in the Tang court in this period. Like her, the vast Buddha was shown aloof, regal and dignified, crowned with jewels and sumptuously clothed in the finest vestments, attended by courts full of Bodhisattvas, protective guardians and wielders of terrifying weapons. The beautiful and oddly feminine face of the Buddha, with its high-arched brows, almond-shaped, half-closed eyes and full, sensuous lips may well be an enormous portrait modelled on the features of Wu Zetian herself.[37]

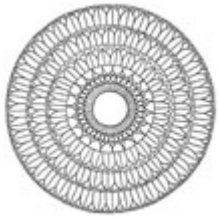
By the time the carving of the vast sculpture of Vairocana Buddha was under way, Xuanzang was nearing the end of his life. Ever since he had returned from India he had been working at an extraordinary rate, busily translating the esoteric Buddhist texts he had brought back from Nalanda. These he believed contained the key to salvation, and the power to bring Enlightenment to struggling humanity. Even as he felt his strength ebbing, he increased rather than diminished his work rate. Still based in the Jade Flower Palace in the mountains outside the new capital of Luoyang, and free from the courtly and administrative duties he had once held, he was now working harder than ever and on ever more esoteric and difficult subjects: in the ten years between 660 and 670 he and his team translated no fewer than 670 fascicles (scrolls) of text, averaging 134 fascicles annually.

Soon after completing work on the notoriously long and complex *Great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*, he told his followers he was unable to go on. He set down his calligraphy brush, determined while he still could to 'practice meditation, to clarify my mind and still its waves, to control the untamed ape of my emotions and restrain the charging elephant of my will'.[38] By this stage his translations of seventy-four different Buddhist texts filled more than 1,300 scrolls, around three times the output of his great predecessor Kumarajiva; yet he was painfully aware that he still had in his possession many of the esoteric Nalanda scrolls which he had never got around to translating.[39]

A few weeks into the new year of 664, the now elderly old monk tripped while crossing a drainage ditch behind his house and broke his leg. From his sickbed, Xuanzang made one last public appearance, preaching a final sermon exhorting his followers to pray to the Bodhisattva Maitreya and to submit to his protection.[40] He made a final confession and a vow to be reborn in Tusita heaven, before giving away all his robes and all his possessions. He died soon after midnight on 5 February 664. His disciples reported seeing four fiery auroras shoot across the stars at the moment of his death.

Shortly afterwards, Daoxuan, one of Xuanzang's translators, wrote the following note about his master:

I listened to Xuanzang's words and observed his actions, and he lived up to his reputation. His extraordinary energy lasted from morning until night. Scheduling his time according to the work to be done, he was diligent and untiring in applying his mind to the service of the Dharma. He did not speak of fame or profit. In his actions he cut off the superficial and understood perfectly how to make the most of opportunities and penetrate to the heart of matters. He was neither arrogant nor obsequious, but always acted in accord with the moment. His words were profound and his discourses removed people's doubts. He was not only a virtuous hero of our generation but also a Dharma General of the Buddhist tradition.[41]



In the years that followed, the Emperor Gaozong's health got steadily worse. Before long he was unable to mount his horse and, like Xuanzang before him, retired to his sickbed.[42] All the while, Wu Zetian steadily consolidated her position. As early as 674 she had adopted the title of Heavenly Empress, setting herself above all previous empresses. Around the same time she created her own administrative power base, a loyal think tank or even shadow cabinet of ambitious literati known as the Scholars of the Northern Gate. Among their other duties, these hand-picked officers spent their days dutifully composing political treatises and dreaming up policies specifically geared towards amplifying the Heavenly Empress's unprecedented authority.[43]

The Empress also announced – supposedly on the orders of her husband – that the Buddhist clergy would now stand on an equal footing with the Daoists, the first step in her eventual goal of establishing Buddhism as the state religion.[44] But it was only after the death of Gaozong at the end of 683 that she made the moves that allowed her to seize the throne in her own right, and to have her authority backed by the Buddhists as a counterweight to the misogynistic court Confucians who strongly resisted the idea that any woman would ever be fit to rule China.[45]

Initially, the Empress planned to rule through her eldest son, the former Prince of the Buddha's Light. But when he and his wife proved to have a will of their own, the Empress summarily deposed them after just two months. She convened the full court, accused the Emperor of treasonable intent and had him removed by the guard; both husband and wife were quickly packed off to internal exile. In his place, the Empress installed his 22-year-old brother, who had a severe speech impediment and could barely talk. The severely handicapped new Emperor, Ruizong, was kept a virtual prisoner in the palace, away from the usual state apartments, and was not allowed to participate even in the routine activities of the court. He was also refused an enthronement ceremony.[46]

In 684, the Confucian establishment struck back and a major rebellion broke out against her rule. According to one angry official, who let rip with more passion than accuracy,

> the woman Wu, who has falsely usurped the throne, is by nature obdurate and unyielding, by origin truly obscure. Formerly she served Taizong with her body, and then made use of an occasion when [Gaozong] was changing his clothes to commit fornication with him. Later she brought disturbance to the palace, and concealing her intimacy with the late Emperor, secretly contrived to become the favourite of the sovereign. She plotted the ruin of the original Empress [the Lady Wang] and entrapped our Emperor into incest. She slew her sister, murdered her brother, assassinated her Lord and poisoned her own mother.
>
> Her heart is like a serpent and her nature like a wolf. Gods and men have cast her out. Heaven and earth have no room for her. She has harboured in her evil heart thoughts aiming at the mastery of the State; she has imprisoned the beloved son of our Emperor in a side passage and raised up her own thieving kin to places of honour and authority. The earth on the Emperor's grave is not yet dry, but where is his full-grown adult son? When you look at the world today, which family possesses the Empire?[47]

Despite the leadership of the great Tang General Li Jingye, the rebellion was mercilessly crushed in less than three months after the Empress had successfully mobilised 300,000 men. The rebel leaders were all captured, tortured and executed.

Aged fifty-eight, with her enemies in disarray, the Heavenly Empress believed the moment had nearly come for her to rule in her own right. To prepare the way, she brought in Buddhist advisers who willingly manipulated ancient prophecies so as to buttress the shaky legitimacy of her rule. Her problem lay in the fact that Confucian philosophy explicitly looked on women as inferior to men: Confucius himself boasted that he declined to associate with 'women, servants and inferior persons'.[48] Women were therefore deemed unsuited to any role in public life, let alone to ruling the empire. Wu's solution was as simple as it was bold: to marginalise the Confucians by having herself recognised as a semi-divine Bodhisattva incarnate – effectively a Buddhist deity – who was therefore beyond all earthly criticism and whose will was an expression of Heavenly Law. This meant the Mandate of Heaven had passed to the Empress Wu neither through marriage into the ruling dynasty nor through far-sighted politicking and the ruthless elimination of her rivals, but instead by virtue of omnipotent and eternal Divine Right. This is the moment we first hear of her origin story as the daughter of a god.[49]

To back this up she looked to esoteric Indian Buddhist texts of the sort Xuanzang had brought back with him from India. She employed a group of Buddhist scholars, many of them recent immigrants from India, to find in these texts ancient prophecies which would show that her seizure of power, far from being an act of megalomania by one woman, was actually an important part of the divine plan for humanity.

It was a moment, moreover, that was prefigured by prophecies and confirmed by oracles, by the miraculous discovery of holy Buddhist relics and by other celestial signs and wonders. By offering generous rewards to those who reported such signs, she ensured that many such omens were recorded, and as one chronicler put it, 'people from all over the Empire competed with each other to inform her of auspicious omens'. Soon the Empress's staff were busying themselves jotting down reports of 'auspicious divine rocks', white magpies, three-legged fowls and chickens which mysteriously changed sex into cockerels. A phoenix was reported perching on the roof of the palace. A red crow with 'vermilion feathers on a cinnabar body', symbol of prosperity, was seen in the Hall of Audience. Before long an entire flock of red birds was reported flying through the hall. Officials who called out such omens as frauds or outright forgeries were quickly demoted and transferred to distant provincial postings.[50]

Towards the end of the 680s a group of ten mostly Indian Buddhist monks arrived at the palace with exactly the text the Empress had hoped for. This was a newly composed commentary and interpretation of an old Mahayana text known as *The Great Cloud Sutra* which was then believed to have been written by the Buddha himself. According to the new commentary, the sutra clearly identified the Empress, 'the Divine August One', as no less a figure than Xuanzang's preferred spiritual guide, the great future Buddha Lord Maitreya, come down to earth to rule all Sentient Creatures.[51]

The 37th chapter of the sutra described a goddess, a Devi named Vimalaprabha, the Heavenly Lady Pure and Radiant, one of the Buddha's female disciples, who had retained her female identity on earth, so that she could help all sentient beings. The Buddha had prophesied that 700 years after his birth Vimalaprabha would return, sent by Yama, Lord of Death, to rule the earth, but now reborn as a princess. She would bring blessings to all mankind and be loved by all the people because of her astonishing beauty. Moreover, she would be accepted across the world as a *chakravartin* or Wheel-Turning Universal Ruler. The sutra prophesied that in this way she would effortlessly, and peacefully, extend her rule over the entire continent of Jambudvipa, which included both China and India. Under her rule, Jambudvipa would turn into an earthly paradise, a utopia where all would bow their heads before her. In this incarnation, she would eventually reach Buddhahood in the form of Lord Maitreya:

> The prophecy of the Devi is that she should rule over the land in the body of a woman … I will send the Devi with rods of gold to punish any arrogant and recalcitrant men that refuse her … and she will obtain one quarter of the realm of the Chakravartin. Harvests will be bountiful, joy without limit. The people will flourish, secure from desolation and illness, of worry, fear, and disaster …
>
> The woman having received the true power, will subdue the world … There will be none who will resist or oppose her and the rulers of neighbouring lands will all come to offer allegiance to this woman as the successor to the imperial throne. Once she has taken the Way of the Dharma, the world will be awed into submission … She will hoist marvellous flags and parasols of many coloured cloth and

everywhere she will make acts of veneration with the perfume of sandalwood … In a future generation when incalculable *kalpas* have passed, this queen will be a Buddha … unsurpassed lord … master of gods and men, awakened and honoured by the entire world.[52]

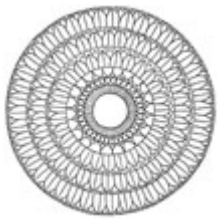
There were, admittedly, a few small problems with the text, not least that the prophecy clearly stated the Buddha would be reborn not in northern China but in southern India; moreover, the timing was badly off: over a thousand years had already passed since the Buddha's death. But who could dwell on such minor quibbles when everything else in the prophecy fitted so magnificently? The monks, led by Master Huaiyi, 'a man of unusual strength and size', recently appointed abbot of the White Horse Monastery and rumoured to be the Empress's new lover, were well rewarded for their pioneering scholarship: they were given the purple robe and quickly recruited into imperial service.[53]

Here they joined several other new arrivals from India, including scientists, faith healers, hypnotists, compounders of drugs and a star-gazer with the auspicious name of Gautama Siddhartha, who was duly appointed the new astronomer royal.[54] If Chinese philosophy and court custom opposed the rise of the new Empress Wu then Indian customs and religious ideas would have to be imported to replace them. Copies of the sutra and the commentary were distributed to towns and monasteries across the realm, and new Buddhist establishments were founded in every prefecture of the empire as well as in the two capitals specifically to study and celebrate the text. Regular lectures on the sutra were to be given in each of these establishments.[55]

Finally, on 21 September 690, in a proclamation issued atop the Zetian Gate in Luoyang, came the culmination of her long, meticulously ordered campaign: the Empress not only deposed her own son, the puppet Emperor, but terminated the Tang and established her own dynasty. This she designated the Zhou after a halcyon era in ancient Chinese history. At the same time Buddhism was made the state religion and the Daoist clergy demoted in court rank below the Buddhists. Henceforth all state occasions would now involve Buddhist rituals, the chanting of sutras, mantras and spells, vegetarian feasts for the Buddhist clergy and donations to temples and monasteries. Following the edicts of Ashoka, the slaughter of animals and the catching of fish were both now forbidden. The Empress also announced an entirely new bespoke Zhou calendar to replace the Tang one and an additional new set of Chinese characters to add to the Chinese writing system.[56]

The new Empress was now to be referred to as the Chakravartin Empress Wu of the Zhou Dynasty, Divine Sovereign of the Golden Wheel of the Law. To this, in 695, she officially added a further title: the Peerless Maitreya. The former Fifth Concubine was now to be publicly revered as both Universal Sovereign and Future Buddha.[57]

Soon afterwards, to complete the work, all the surviving princes of the House of Tang were arrested overnight and quickly put to death.[58]



The pinnacle of the Empress's triumph was the construction of the Heavenly City of the Bodhisattva Maitreya in Luoyang. At the centre of this vast complex was a Mingtang, or a vast 'Bright Hall of Illumination', something traditionally associated with longevity and immortality, and intended as an architectural symbol of a virtuous government which harmonised nature with the wider cosmos.

Every detail was planned long in advance, and the groundwork for the project was laid as early as 685, a full five years before the Empress seized absolute power. Although the Mingtang was something with deep roots in Chinese culture, and was based on the Confucian Book of Rites, the Mingtang of Empress Wu was quite different from any other. Designed by her alleged lover, the Buddhist Master Huaiyi, in the form of an esoteric Buddhist *yantra* (a Tantric geometrical diagram) or *mandala* (a configuration of symbols used to create a sacred space), it was a city-within-a-city, shot through with messianic and esoteric Buddhist ideas as well as bearing other strange and unusual features. Its aim was to glorify the Empress in the form of Maitreya.[59]

Master Huaiyi based his Mingtang on the descriptions of the magical city of Maitreya contained in an apocryphal sixth-century Buddhist text called *The Attestation Sutra*. According to this text, Maitreya would one day descend from Tusita heaven to a magnificent city full of decorated pavilions and a fair tower, 'a City of Transformation with a pillar of white silver above and an inscription for the myriad generations below. The Devi will don heavenly robes, hang golden bells on the pillar, and then summon the Buddha's disciples all at once to enter the City.'[60] In the text, only those destined for salvation would be admitted to the city described in the sutra; but the Empress ordered Master Huaiyi to build a version in the centre of Luoyang which anyone could visit.[61]

At the centre of the complex were the three buildings, built on a north–south axis, which made up the heart of the Mingtang. In the centre were a pair of sacred towers. These consisted of a big wooden tower on to which a second, slightly smaller tower was joined. In the north was a university building surrounded by a circular moat, in the south, the Mingtang Hall of Government. This was a huge building, built on three levels, the bottom two square, like the earth, and the top one round, like the heavens. On the roof, 300 feet above the ground, nine dragons held aloft a basin on which was perched a twenty-foot-high gold-plated phoenix, tensed for flight.

The 'Firmament-Piercing' tower called the Tiantang or 'Hall of Heaven' was even more impressive; indeed it was then the tallest man-made structure in the world. A five-storey octagonal wooden pagoda, it contained within it a lacquer statue of Maitreya Buddha 880 feet high, with the head alone measuring 150 feet. It was so large that 'several tens of men could stand on its fingers'. It represented the Pure Land where Maitreya had lived before incarnating in the person of the Empress.

The smaller tower was called the Dayi, or 'Great Regulator'. This was a practical 'House of the Calendar', built to make astronomical calculations. On the ground floor were painted representations of the four seasons and the twelve months, each in their appropriate colours. In the centre was a giant armillary sphere to study the heavens. Nearby, an artisan from Haizhou had installed what may well be the world's oldest known water-powered mechanical clock, centring on a 'Wheel for Reporting the Twelve Hours', which was said to operate 'without the slightest mistake'. This included twelve clockwork automaton statues of the hour gods, a great bell and drums, as well as other remarkable effects: 'when the wheel came to the exact south position, the Wu (south) door opened and a horse's head appeared'.[62]

The clock was connected to the top of the observatory tower, which was full of measuring devices, astronomical instruments and a moving model of the universe with water-powered celestial globes. Some observers referred to the building as the 'Divine Palace of the Myriad Starry Simulacra'.[63]

Finally, in 695, to mark the establishment of her new Zhou dynasty, the Empress erected nearby what she called the Tianshu or 'Axis of Heaven', a 100-foot-tall octagonal Buddhist metal pillar topped 'with a quartet of dragon men holding aloft a radiant fire pearl' of polished bronze and 'a figure of a divine being holding up a bowl'. This was inscribed with the names of her vassals and neighbouring tributary princes, a reminder of the Empress Wu's unmatched power as a world-conquering *chakravartin*. The Axis was designed by an Indian architect, built under the supervision of a Korean foreman and funded by tributary Central Asian rulers.[64]

To celebrate the Raising of the Axis, the final completion of her grand project, the Empress received 'a delegation of Indian kings', in perfect accordance with the prophecies.[65] She then held a grand vegetarian banquet. At the feast, monks from India and Gandhara presented the Empress with yet another prophetic sutra, this time *The Sutra of the Rain of Jewels*, 'a calculated forgery', according to one historian, which again revealed an ancient prophecy of the Buddha being reborn into a female body and so restoring the Buddhist *dharma*.[66] During the festivities, the guests were invited to compose poems in praise of the gleaming new pillar. The winning effort was Li Jiao's 'Poem Respectfully Composed for the Empress at the Celebratory Banquet for Chinese and Non-Chinese Officers Commemorating the Completion of the Axis of Heaven':

West to Mount Yan, it illumines the cart-tracks;
North to the state of Yan, its merit is proclaimed.

What better occasion for the ten thousand nations to congregate,
Lauding this grand achievement before the nine imperial gates?

In dazzling luminosity it approaches the brilliance of both celestial orbs,

Entering the glowing purple haze in the lofty ethers high above.

Dew gathers in the canopy of the immortals,
As the lofty pillar upholds the firmament.

Above it rise cumulus mountains of cloud,
And the refulgent pearl hangs in the sky like a great sun.

The fame of the Empress echoes through the world for countless *kalpas*;
Her *karma* fixed eternal, until the seas become rice-fields.

Joyfully we encounter her as the reincarnation [of Maitreya],
A time resembling the glorious years of ancient sage rulers.[67]

The monks and Buddhist scholars behind what was effectively an esoteric Buddhist *coup d'état* over the Chinese Confucian establishment formed a remarkable and sometimes brilliant clique at the heart of the Empress Wu's court. A number of them were Indian; many others had trained in Indian universities.

The most striking evidence of Indian influence in Wu Zetian's coup is contained in a dedicatory passage, or colophon, at the end of a manuscript of the *Great Cloud Sutra* found in the celebrated library of Dunhuang on the edge of the Taklamakan desert. The colophon records the names of the monks involved in the translation of the sutra under the supervision of Master Huaiyi, the man who was given the task of designing the Mingtang. All of these had effectively volunteered their services as the new Empress's propagandists, giving a divine rationale to legitimise the regime outside Confucian tradition.

Of the thirty people listed in the colophon, nine were monks from South Asia. Aware of the headlong decline of Buddhism in India, where a resurgent Hinduism was now enjoying a major revival at the expense of the Buddhists, these monks were apparently seeking to turn China into a sacred Buddhist realm in its place, and thus transform it into a new centre of the Buddhist world.[68]

The most celebrated was probably Bodhiruci, a monk from South India and a scholar of the Mahayana with a talent for incantations. He was warmly received by the Empress, who gave him accommodation at the royal monastery of Foshouji and put him to work completing the translations of the 120 Sanskrit and Prakrit scrolls left unfinished at the death of Xuanzang. According to the Dunhuang colophon, Bodhiruci was the main expounder of the Sanskrit text of the *Great Cloud Sutra*, along with another monk called Fanmo by the Chinese (his Indian name has not come down to us) who is said to have been 'an envoy from the king of Middle India'. It was Bodhiruci who actually declared the Empress to be *chakravartin*.[69]

Among the other Indians to rise to eminence at this time was the celebrated Gautama Siddhartha, the Supervisor of the Bureau of Astronomy between 665 and 698. It was his job to regulate the official calendar used in government and to interpret astral omens and other heavenly phenomenon for the Empress. As such, he was also expected to make the astronomical tables which could be used correctly to predict crucial celestial events such as solar and lunar eclipses, around which the religious and magical rituals of state were scheduled.

Gautama was the first of three generations of his family who successively held the position; over that time his children and grandchildren married high-ranking officials. He was also the man in charge of making readings using the sophisticated planetary instruments brought together in the Mingtang. For all these jobs he would have had to access the deep Sanskrit mathematical, astronomical and astrological learning for which the Indians were already celebrated not just in China but across the new Islamic world.

Gautama put together a vast compendium of stellar omens entitled the *Prognostic Canon of Great Tang* based on the writings of the great Indian astronomical polymath, Varahamihira (505–87) of Ujjain; but he was best known for his Chinese translation of one the most important of all Indian astronomical treatises, the *Nine Planets*. This was valued for its accurate prediction of eclipses, and for containing several crucial Indic mathematical advances, then unknown in China, such as using a dot for zero and a full table of sine

functions. Nor were Gautama's family the only dynasty of Indian astronomers employed by the Bureau at this time: there are records of two other Brahmin families of star-watchers at work in the capital at the same time, the Kumaras and the Kashyapas.[70]

The most adventurous of the Empress Wu's clique of Buddhist advisers and confidants was the monk Yijing. Like Xuanzang, Yijing was a restless traveller monk who had risked everything to study at the feet of the Indian Buddhist masters of Nalanda. But the world had changed radically since the days when Xuanzang had to creep out of China unobserved, risking the arrows of border guards and the shifting deserts of the Taklamakan to reach the great universities of India. By 671, when Yijing set off for India, traffic between the two worlds was so routine and frequent that the monk was able to catch a Persian ship to Bengal with only one stopover on the way.

Moreover, that stopover – the island of Sumatra, by this time the heart of a new Buddhist maritime empire named Srivijaya – was itself a major centre of Buddhist learning, just twenty days' sailing from the Chinese port of Guangzhou. In the book of travels Yijing wrote in imitation of his master Xuanzang, he mentions that it was no longer necessary to travel all the way to India to learn Sanskrit, and that the monastic schools of Srivijaya were so sophisticated that a man could learn all he needed there without ever risking the choppy and pirate-haunted waters of the Bay of Bengal.

Nevertheless, on his arrival in India, at the Bengali port of Tamralipti, on the Hooghly near modern Calcutta, Yijing happened to bump into a fellow disciple of Xuanzang. He soon made up his mind to spend his first year with the monk, learning Sanskrit, before heading off on a pilgrimage around the Buddhist holy sites and then eventually making his way to Nalanda. There he spent ten years at the great monastery university, from 675 to 685, immersing himself particularly in the study of monastic Vinaya rules which he believed had become badly corrupted in China. He records that at that time he was one of no fewer than fifty Chinese monks then studying at Nalanda.[71]

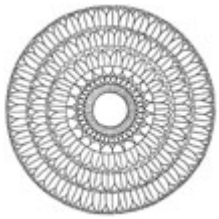
In 691, in preparation for his return home, Yijing sent a fellow Chinese monk to Luoyang with two compilations of his work and some translations, as a gift for the new Empress Wu. The following year Yijing finally travelled back to China after twenty-four years abroad searching for Buddhist manuscripts and relics. He brought with him a library of 400 texts still unknown in China and 300 holy relics. Yijing departed from Sumatra some time in 693 and two years later reached Luoyang, where he received a rapturous reception. The Empress Wu personally went out to the city gates of Luoyang to welcome him.[72]

It was now 695, the crucial year of Wu's elevation to supreme power. Yijing was not slow to return the honour done to him by using his authority to endorse the newly proclaimed divinity of the Empress. This he did by authenticating a jade tablet inscribed with mysterious writing that had allegedly been 'discovered' in a chest. Drawing on his perceived mastery of exotic tongues, Yijing pronounced the tablet another miraculous divine prophecy of Wu's rule.

Yijing was then appointed to the imperial monastery of Foshouji, where he set to work alongside Bodhiruci, continuing the programme of translation. By the end, he had completed the translation of a further sixty-one Yogacara texts. The Empress personally attended Yijing's lectures on the subject in the course of its translation, and she even wrote a preface, declaring that 'I, from youth, venerated Buddha Shakyamuni's teaching and very early did I desire to take refuge in the Three Treasures.'[73] Wu also sponsored Yijing's scholars to create a new catalogue of the Buddhist canon and to compile a Sanskrit–Chinese dictionary containing over a thousand Chinese Buddhist loan words with their exact meaning.[74]

By the end of Wu's reign, the largest library in China, the Institute for the Advancement of Literature, or Hongwenguan, in Chang'an, had grown to hold 200,000 fascicles of hand-copied books, making it larger even than the biggest libraries in Byzantium. Chang'an had by now gained an international reputation as a centre of Buddhist learning in its own right.

It attracted monks and scholars from across the Buddhist world, especially Japan and Korea, who flocked to use the collections of 'sutras, literary writings, incantations, prose collections, poetry, horoscopes, omen texts and underground literature, all copied on exquisite paper and stacked in Chinese book cases'. Through their efforts complete sets of the Buddhist canon were transmitted to Korea and from there to Japan. At the centre of the library there was a celebrated octagonal 'revolving repository', invented for storing the sutras. There is even evidence of bibliolatry – an actual cult of books, literally book worship – as mentioned in the *Lotus Sutra*, which was translated twice in Chang'an at around this time.[75]



Not all the Empress's inner Buddhist clique were Indian; several were Buddhist masters from Central Asia. The Empress invited the Venerable Siksananda to come from Khotan with a copy of a rare Mahayana text she was interested in, the *Avatamsaka Sutra*; she sat beside him as he translated his copy of the holy book, 'a presence which cannot have made his philological work any easier'.[76] She reportedly even volunteered her services as his copyist.[77] She also showed a persistent interest in the Zen successors of Bodhidharma at the celebrated centre of monastic martial arts, Shaolin: when the Zen Patriarch came to the palace she sank to her knees as he entered, then attended his lectures on the Zen philosophy of intuition.[78]

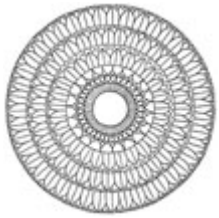
Towards the end of her reign, she also showered her patronage on the brilliant Central Asian Zen scholar monk Fazang, who as a teenager had burned off his finger as an offering to the Buddha. 'Light emanated from his mouth as he spoke,' we are told, 'and the earth shook.' The Empress believed in his powers and used to invite him to the capital to pray for rain, work magic and, on one occasion, summon celestial forces to defeat an incursion of nomads: 'heavenly drums resounded and Guanyin, the Bodhisattva of Mercy, appeared on high commanding a vast army of divine troops who had materialised to combat the raiders. The spectacle plunged the nomads into panic.'[79]

The Indians, the Central Asians and the Chinese monks who had studied at the Indian Buddhist universities remained at the heart of Empress Wu's grand project: to build a new Buddhist 'Pure Land' or Eden, in what had previously been a Confucian country.

In the process they created an Indic renaissance at the heart of China. At court, Sanskrit poetry held great allure for the imperial poets. Chinese painters still drew heavily on the different Indian models for depicting the Buddha. Even Chinese furniture began to be fashioned after Indian precedents. Prior to the advent of Buddhism, the Chinese sat on mats; now, following the example of Indian monks, they began sitting on low chairs.

At the same time, the Chinese diet was transformed by the adoption of the sugar brought by Indian Buddhist missionaries. Indian incense, drugs, aromatics and medical texts were imported, and embassies were sent to look for the most renowned Indian scientists, astronomers and astrologers to help with calendrical calculations, as well as to seek out hypnotists and faith healers who claimed to know the mantras and formulae of longevity, all secrets which Indians were widely supposed to possess.[80]

It was a high-water mark of Indian influence in China, and one that would never be reached again.



Despite the many alleged omens celebrating the Empress's rule as a long-prophesied utopia, neither the Mingtang nor the reign of the Empress Wu Zetian ended well.

One night in 696, only a year after the raising of the Axis of Heaven, a fire broke out in the five-storey Maitreya Tower. It quickly spread, engulfing the entire Bright Hall complex and lighting up Luoyang as brightly as if it was day. By the following morning the entire complex had been reduced to ashes.

Some said the fire had been started by accident when a brazier was knocked over. But the Empress's enemies gossiped that the complex was destroyed by its own architect, the monk Huaiyi, when he discovered that Wu had taken a new lover – the imperial physician Shen Nanqiu. Shortly afterwards, at least according to later Confucian historians, Wu had Master Huaiyi throttled. Having first been overpowered by 'several of the stronger and sturdier palace women', the monk was bound to a tree, 'beaten and then strangled … The body was put into a common cart and sent back to the White Horse Monastery.'[81]

In the years that followed, the exhausted Empress Wu finally began to show her age. In 699, she fell

badly ill while on a pilgrimage. The following year, she drank a Daoist longevity elixir that was said to have taken three years to prepare and cost almost as much as the Mingtang complex. She claimed to feel restored, but nevertheless spent longer and longer in retreat at her palace in the Shanxi mountains sixty miles from Luoyang. The administration was left in the hands of her latest favourites, two much hated playboys known as the brothers Zhang, celebrated for their musical talents, exquisite robes and lavish use of make-up. For the first time in her long life Wu seemed to be losing her appetite for government.[82]

It was around this time that the sick Empress, now aged about seventy-five, ordered a gold tablet, fourteen inches long, to be hidden in a crevice at the top of the middle peak of Mount Song. The tablet, which was only rediscovered by a peasant in 1982, was intended to absolve her sins and seems to demonstrate her growing awareness of the spiritual consequences of her murderous deeds over the course of her reign. The tablet records her prayers 'to the Three Ministers and Nine Treasures of Nature that they might expiate her sinful nature and remove her name from the register of punishable sinners'. The inscription records that the tablet was taken to Mount Song by the same Daoist priest who had manufactured the longevity elixir.[83]

In what were probably further attempts at expiating her sins, she had another giant Buddha sculpted outside Luoyang on the slopes above the White Horse Monastery and had Xuanzang's Wild Goose Pagoda magnificently repaired and enlarged. She also raised one last great monument, the Qibao Tower of the Seven Jewels, full of esoteric Buddhist sculptures in a new ultra-realistic style.[84]

In 699 the increasingly infirm Empress assembled all her children and got them to swear a solemn oath to live in harmony after her death. Two years later she gathered them again and made them swear to respect the succession, or rather restoration, of the deposed Crown Prince, Li Xian, Xuanzang's godson, who had once been known as Prince of the Buddha's Light. She then summoned the former Emperor from exile in the provinces to live with her in the capital.

After more than a decade of estrangement, the two met on a wintry day on the road between Chang'an and Luoyang. Amid billowing snow, Li Xian sank to the ground and touched his mother's feet.[85]

There were rumours that the Empress Wu was finally thinking of abdicating; but if that was what she was contemplating, the Crown Prince moved before she could. In 705, while Wu was laid low with a spell of illness, there was a midnight coup. The Empress awoke in the night to find a large crowd standing in the torchlight outside her bedroom, among them 500 of the elite Yulin Palace Guard. She went out to berate them in her bedclothes, dishevelled and enraged. There, in the centre of the courtyard, lay the beheaded bodies of her two favourites, the Zhang brothers.

'Who is making this disturbance?' she asked in fury.

The plotters answered meekly that the Zhang brothers had been plotting rebellion, and so they had executed them before they could act.

Then the Empress spotted her trembling son shuffling nervously from foot to foot at the back of the crowd.

'So, you too are here!' she exclaimed contemptuously. 'Well, the two boys have now been killed. Now you can all go back to where you came from!'

With that she turned and went straight back to bed. The following morning she formally abdicated in favour of the Crown Prince.[86] But for all her sangfroid during the coup, the Empress Wu never recovered from the shock of her deposition; for the remaining months of her life she became a spectre on the political scene. She died shortly afterwards, on 16 December, in the seclusion of her favourite Shang Yang Palace, sixty-seven years after she first arrived in the palace as a fifth-ranking concubine. She was now aged eighty-one. She had held the reins of power for half a century.[87]

The Empress was buried in the elaborate tomb she had erected for her husband Gaozong, but her tombstone was left blank, a monument without an inscription, or epitaph, or any of the encomiums enjoyed by all her predecessors. Instead it was like a *tabula rasa*, bearing only a carved ostrich, along with dragons and oysters and guarded by a line of winged heavenly horses. It seems to invite future generations of historians to come to their own verdict about her unique reign.[88]

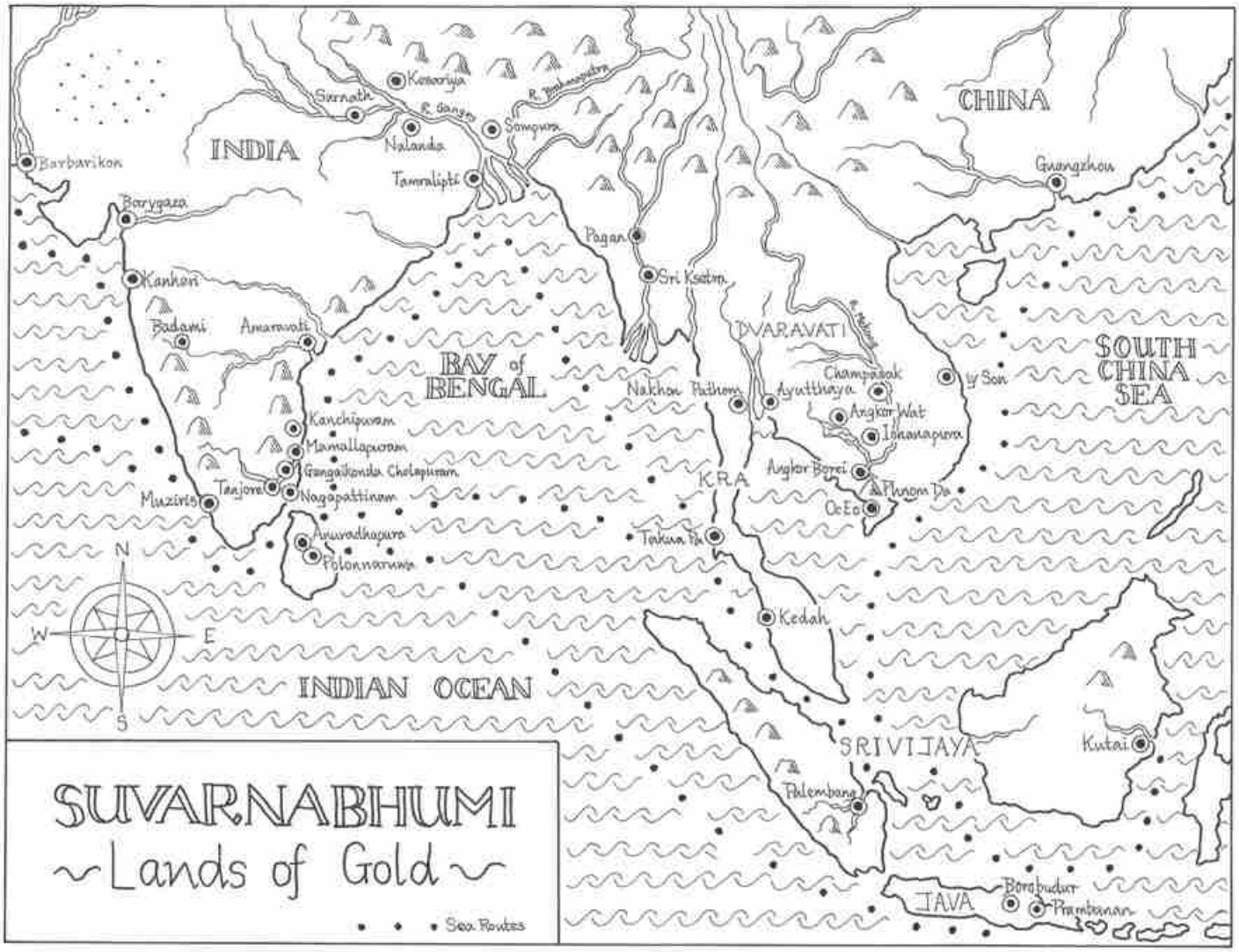
Wu led an extraordinary life; but for her own age she had simply broken too many rules. Almost immediately the Confucian historians got to work erasing her achievements and compiling long accounts of her sins and murderous misdemeanours, so turning her in some accounts into a one-dimensional cartoon villain, as sadistic as she was lascivious. The patriarchal male Confucian historians who wrote about her reign depicted it as a terrible break with tradition, an experiment with female rule that must never be

allowed to be repeated.[89]

Never again would Buddhism receive the scale of imperial patronage devoted to it during the reign of the Empress Wu; never again would the civilisations of India and China be bound together so intimately. But while the exchange and civilisational conversation between the two receded in subsequent years from the high point of the reign of the Empress Wu, much that was built in these years did endure for centuries. Today China still has the largest Buddhist community on the planet; in that sense the vision of the Empress and her clique was realised: China did indeed become the new centre of the Buddhist world.

In recent years the number of Chinese (and particularly Taiwanese) pilgrims visiting the Buddhist holy sites in India has reached unprecedented heights: today at Bodh Gaya pilgrims from China and Taiwan now outnumber all the others put together.

On arrival, they are greeted by a large statue of Xuanzang, striding towards Nalanda with a backpack full of scrolls, a small memorial to an often forgotten time when the Chinese looked towards India for guidance and inspiration.


SUVARNABHUMI
~Lands of Gold~
Sea Routes
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CHINA
BAY of BENGAL
SOUTH CHINA SEA
INDIAN OCEAN
DVARAVATI
KRA
SRIVIJAYA
JAVA
Barbarikon
Barygaza
Kanheri
Badami
Amaravati
Kanchipuram
Mamallapuram
Gangaikonda Cholapuram
Tanjore
Nagapattinam
Muziris
Anuradhapura
Polonnaruwa
Sarnath
Kesariya
Nalanda
Tamralipti
Sompura
Pagan
Sri Ksetra
Nakhon Pathom
Ayutthaya
Champasak
Angkor Wat
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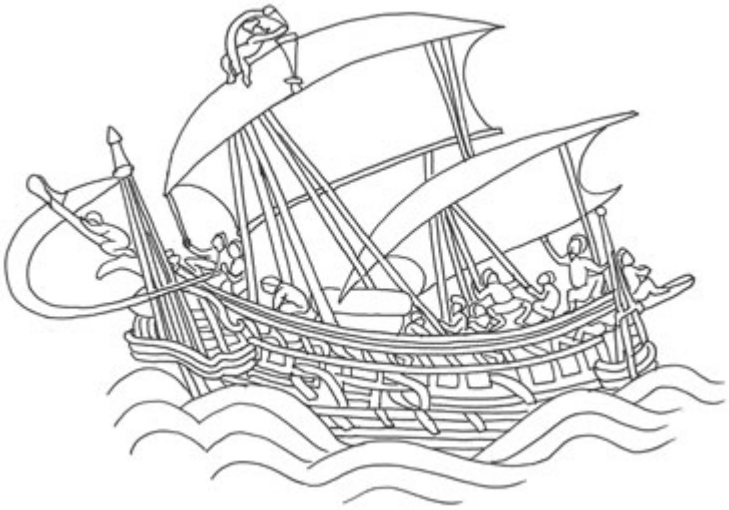


The Diaspora of the Gods

6

The Adi Varaha cave lies a little back from the old harbour front at Mamallapuram, on the eastern coast of India. Here boats heading to Java and South-east Asia were once loaded up before setting sail for Suvarnabhumi, the Golden Lands.

The cave now lies outside the archaeological park where most of the town's major monuments are located. The site is still a living temple, but it is usually kept locked and it can be a struggle to obtain the key from the usually absent Brahmin supposed to tend it. It is, however, well worth making the effort. For here is probably the earliest complete portrait sculpture of an Indian ruler to survive intact, giving an opportunity to look at the face of the man who was ruling this port when the great Tamil merchants' fleets were setting out on the Golden Road to the east.

The larger-than-life portrait statue of Mahendravarman Pallava, carved into the living rock of the cave, is an image of remarkable precision and expressive force. It shows a tall, commanding and broad-shouldered man, bare-chested and barefoot, but with a slim, athletic waist. He sports a cap, a *dhoti* around his loins and long earrings. He is caught apparently mid-anecdote with his finger pointing out of the frame and a slight smile on his lips; his face is engaging and humorous, with large eyes, a prominent nose and full lips. His left hand rests on the wrist of his lithe young queen, who stands shyly to one side, also bare-chested; a beautiful second queen, with pendant earrings, stands attendant to her left. Both women are shown with their heads slightly inclined towards their lord, as if listening to him talk. Both are depicted as strikingly sensuous figures, with long legs and sparkling anklets visible under their translucent silk wraps.[1]

Mahendravarman Pallava, who lived from 571 to 630 ce, was the third monarch of the great Pallava dynasty, which ruled much of South-east India from the third to the ninth century, and was arguably the most creative of all the Pallava kings. Taking the titles 'the Curious Minded', 'the Tiger' and 'Drunk with Pleasure', Mahendravarman was an eccentric and idiosyncratic genius, and a true polymath. An eclectic and innovative poet, a lover of puns and a noted musician whose inscriptions obsess about the intricacies of the Carnatic music traditions of southern India and their particular aesthetics, he prided himself on being a connoisseur of pleasure and of alcohol, describing himself in one inscription as 'He of Drunken Revelry'. He was also a great patron of the arts.[2]

Mahendravarman was the author of two lost treatises on south Indian painting and music, and the writer of at least two plays, both short, absurdist farces which do survive and resemble the work of Samuel

Beckett. One of these, a short, cynical and strikingly modern satirical charade called *The Farce of the Drunkards' Games*, tells the story of a drunken worshipper of Shiva and his equally tipsy courtesan lover who get into an argument with a decadent Buddhist monk over a lost skull cup and begging bowl, left lying in a bar in Kanchipuram. The Buddhist monk reminisces about the many luxuries and the splendid food and drink he gets in his monastery. He moans that he needed to get hold of the full and unexpurgated version of the Buddha's teachings, which must surely allow him the pleasures of women too. A holy man from a rival Shaiva sect, who is also trying to sleep with the courtesan, tries to adjudicate; but the matter is resolved only when a passing madman points out that the disputed skull has just been carried off by a stray dog.[3]

The other play is similar in tone and animated by the same sense of humour: a holy man who is a celebrated saint and ascetic exchanges souls with a beautiful courtesan due to a mix-up by Yama, the God of Death. Each character speaks out of the mouth of the other, to the befuddlement of the courtesan's customers and the ascetic's disciples. The playwright revels in identity mix-ups, puns and complex double meanings. Poking fun at both Buddhists and different varieties of Shaiva holy men, both farces are still performed as dance dramas in South India today, 1,300 years after their composition.[4]

Under Mahendravarman Pallava's rule, a creative, intellectual and artistic renaissance swept the Tamil country. Academic pursuits flourished not only in the Buddhist monasteries but in Hindu institutions of the Vedic sciences known as *ghatika*, the greatest of which, in the capital of Kanchipuram, attracted generous royal patronage.[5]

All around Kanchipuram boulders and cliff faces began to be cut away into beautiful cave temples and shrines filled with exquisite sculpture. These include one of the earliest known images of the iconic Shiva as Lord of the Dance, twirling in triumph at his defeat of the demons of ignorance and darkness, while at another level – dreadlocks flying, haloed in fire – he also dances the world into extinction only to bring it back into existence, recreated and preserved anew.[6]

The first of Mahendravarman's many cave temples can be found not far from the boulders of the mighty fort complex of Gingee, a hundred miles south-west of Mamallapuram. It lies under an isolated outcrop of granite looking on to a large tank of water. Into this rock has been cut a cave which, in turn, backs on to three shrines now empty. The complex is guarded by two gigantic sculptures of fearsome Pallava warriors with massively outsized clubs and wild, untended hair.[7]

The simple cave temple at Mandagapattu has an inscription in which Mahendravarman Pallava records how he created a home for the trinity of great Hindu gods, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, 'without the use of bricks, timber, metals and mortar'.[8] This is usually taken to mean that he was the first ruler of the Tamil country to use stone rather than timber, bamboo or brick as a building material, and that it was he who first brought the tradition of rock-cut cave architecture, long flourishing in the Buddhist shrines of the Western Ghats, to the rich lands of the Coromandel coast.[9]

Mahendravarman was also probably the first of the Pallavas to embrace devotional Puranic Hinduism.[10] He was converted from Jainism to Shaivism by the celebrated poet saint Appar, and it was during his rule that the ecstatic Tamil Shaiva and Vaishnava *bhakti* movements blossomed under the leadership of the poet saints.

These popular saints led crowds of ecstatic Tamil devotees from shrine to shrine, singing passionate Tamil songs about their longing for Shiva or Vishnu, or the other incarnations of their Lord whom they approached variously as a child, friend, slave or lover. These *bhakti* saints sang in Tamil rather than the Sanskrit of the Brahmin priests. Their songs transmuted their deep yearning for the divine into the language of the human lover, eternally suspended between union and separation, songs so full of pain and unfulfilled longing that they still speak to anyone who has ever pined for another. The highly sexualised words used by the young *bhakti* woman saint Andal, for example, are startlingly frank, even by the standards of today:

My life will be spared
Only if he will come
To stay with me for one night.
If he will enter me,
So as to leave
the imprint of his saffron paste
upon my breasts
    Mixing, churning, maddening me inside,
    Gathering my swollen ripeness

Spilling nectar,
As my body and blood
Burst into flower.[11]

It was these holy men and women who began the process of bringing their enormously popular brand of Hindu devotion to the southern tip of the Indian peninsula, which since the time of Ashoka had been dominated by the more austere Buddhists and Jains, and before that the cult of warrior heroes and megaliths. According to Xuanzang, in his time the Pallava capital of Kanchipuram was still one of the main Buddhist centres in India, with thousands of monks and a scholarly reputation that Xuanzang said was second only to that of Nalanda.[12]

It was also fast becoming a major centre of Shaivism, and the songs of the Tamil saints often rail against Buddhist and Jain monks, whom they depict as hypocritical, degenerate and alien to Tamil culture.[13] The child saint Sambandar is especially hostile, and often reserves the last, usually tenth, verse of his songs to denounce the Buddhists and, even more so, the Jains.[14]

In this new *bhakti* tradition, it was not necessary to renounce the world, in the manner of the Jains or the Buddhists; nor was it necessary to perform the fire sacrifices prescribed by the Vedas. Instead, intense devotion and passionate *pujas* were believed to bring salvation just as effectively, via a path that was open to almost everyone. For if the gods were universal, ranging through time and space, they were understood to be forcefully present in holy places and most especially in the idols of temples. Here the final climax of worship was to have *darshan*: to see the beauty of the divine image, to meet the eyes of God.

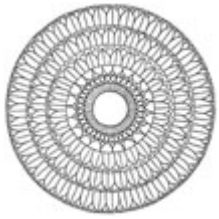
Our Lord is here
He lives within me.
And we're done with
growing and perishing
  waxing and waning
  like the moon –

Done with
  knowing
  and unknowing
like sunshine and nightdark.[15]

It was to slake this religious thirst that Mahendravarman Pallava began to fill his realm with stone temples and finely carved images of the gods, the earliest to survive in the south. He may also have been the first ruler to patronise the casting of bronzes, which became in time south India's most distinctive art form. Exquisitely poised and supple, these abstracted and ritualised south Indian bronze deities stand quite silently on their plinths, yet with their hands they speak gently to their devotees through the noiseless lingua franca of the gestures – *mudras*[16] – of south Indian dance: promising boons and protection, and above all, marriage, fertility and fecundity.

The gods of the Pallavas are both intensely physical and physically gorgeous: their sensuality is understood as an aspect of their perfection. Here, the sensuous and the sacred are not opposed; they are one, and the sensuous is seen as an integral part of the sacred.

These were gods that you could desire and fall in love with; and many devotees did just that.



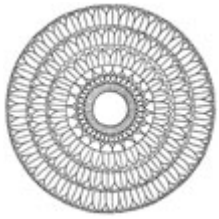
It was Mahendravarman Pallava's son, Narasimhavarman (r.630–68 ce), known as Mamalla, or the 'Great Wrestler', who began the process of turning the Pallavas into a major trading power looking to dominate the lucrative overseas trade with the Lands of Gold to the east, when the focus of India's trade first began shifting from facing west to facing east. It was at this period that their port, Mamallapuram, south of Chennai, became the starting point for many Indians heading out towards South-east Asia and for a time

perhaps the greatest entrepôt of maritime monsoon Asia.[17]

The Adi Varaha cave temple, which contains Mahendra's portrait, was built as part of his son's efforts to transform the port of Mamallapuram, which he named after himself, into one of the world's great centres of trade and the arts. A talented general who took the titles 'Brave Like a Lion', 'Ferocious Arrow' and 'Having the Qualities of an Elephant', Narasimhavarman had widened and deepened the inlet at Mamallapuram to allow the entrance of large naval and trading ships. From here he sent out two military expeditions against Sri Lanka. Fleets of trading ships bound for South-east Asia soon followed. An eighth-century poem talks of how 'ships rode at anchor, bent to the point of breaking, laden as they were with wealth, with big-trunked elephants, and with numerous gems of nine varieties'.[18]

The greatest of the sculptures of Mamallapuram, which once faced on to the harbour, date from the time of Mamalla's rule and are some of the most extraordinary creations in all Indian art. They cover one side of an entire rockface: two huge elephants stand, trunks swinging, to the right of the relief. A family of life-size stone monkeys sit beside them; nearby graze deer while a cow is being milked as it licks its calf. These images jostle with superhuman warrior heroes, bearded sages and meditating ascetics. Above float an airborne cast of gods and goddesses, heavenly nymphs and tree spirits, and cobra-hooded *nagas* and *naginis*. There is a breezy lightness of touch at work: a flute is playing, there is some dancing and high-breasted women are cavorting with their consorts. In some ways it is pure Bollywood.

But this lightness is deceptive. As with all Pallava art, this was a deeply considered work of great sophistication, full of double meanings and elegant ambiguity. It was also technically innovative: rainwater was managed in such a way that on special occasions, perhaps the arrival of a fleet or a visiting ambassador, the sluices could be released so that a river cascaded through the central rift of the sculpture, bathing all the *naga* kings and water creatures in its flood. Likewise, the temples on the seashore were arranged in such a way that the sea lapped at the base of some shrines, lustrating the images, as if nature itself was joining in the worship of the gods.



The sculptures of Mamallapuram have attracted visitors since they were first carved at the height of Mamalla's reign. Indeed, an account survives of a trip to see them written by Dandin, the 'Stick Wielder', who was the Pallavas' most celebrated court poet.

Although little read or even remembered today outside the small circle of those still fluent in literary Sanskrit, Dandin (665–720) was one of the giants of Sanskrit literature and the great intellectual and literary superstar of his day. His words were described as 'a treasure of pure nectar, their expanse a jewelled mirror for the sport of Sarasvati', the Goddess of Music, Learning and Poetry.[19] Born a year after the death of Xuanzang, Dandin wore many hats: he was a critic and connoisseur, a scholar and literary theorist, as well as an admired and adventurous poet and virtuoso playwright. He was also author of the world's first coming-of-age novel, a seventh-century south Indian forerunner of Jack Kerouac's 1957 novel *On the Road* called the *Dasakumaracharita*, or 'What Ten Young Men Did'.[20]

The book is made up of ten fictional autobiographies, written in gorgeous prose with 'words that seem to be dancing'. Indeed it is one of the first prose texts in Sanskrit literature. Warm, irreverent and humorous, it tells of youthful wanderlust, adventures, riots, thievery, murder, seduction, lovebites and every imaginable variety of sexual and amorous experimentation.[21] These presumably reflect Dandin's own experiences when, during his childhood and adolescence, the newly orphaned writer spent twelve years wandering through India, homeless and initially impoverished, after the armies of the Chalukya dynasty from Badami, north-west of the Tamil country, sacked the Pallava capital in 670.

It was Dandin's luck to live through an extraordinary moment in history which saw the Pallavas move quickly from abject defeat at the hands of their rivals to a series of stunning victories which won them supreme power over the whole southern tip of India. In his mid-twenties, Dandin was able to return to the Pallava court in triumph 'after wandering in other regions, living among distinguished scholars and acquiring irreproachable knowledge that was proved in assemblies of the most respected Brahmins and

Kshatriyas'.[22] He was on hand to see the Pallava capital, Kanchipuram, rise from the ashes, its temples rebuilt and enlarged, and its court enriched by an unprecedented flow of trade with the Lands of Gold and the thriving China of the Empress Wu Zetian.

On his return to the Pallava court, Dandin wrote the greatest work of Sanskrit literary criticism, the *Kavyadarsha*, or 'The Mirror of Poetry', regarded as one of the most influential works of its kind after Aristotle's *Poetics*.[23] He also wrote one of the most celebrated poems in Sanskrit, *The Story of the Beautiful Woman of Avanti*. Both these works came to be read not just across the length and breadth of India, but also, in time, across South-east Asia and China, in the new, partially Indianised world that Pallava trade was then opening up. For, as always, where trade led, ideas and the arts followed.[24]

Dandin was living through a remarkable moment in the cultural history of Asia. According to the Sanskritist Sheldon Pollock, 'all across mainland and maritime South-east Asia, people who spoke radically different languages, such as Mon-Khmer and Malayo-Polynesian, and lived in vastly different cultural worlds, adopted widely, suddenly, and long-lastingly a new language, Sanskrit – along with the new political vision and literary aesthetic that were inseparable from it'.[25]

As a result, Indian epics and Indian books began to be read, copied and recited all over the newly extended Indosphere of South-east Asia and beyond; Indian plays and Indian dances were performed to Indian music. Reliefs of the great Indian epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* would soon begin to be carved on temples thousands of miles from India's shores. In time, Dandin became one of the most widely read writers of the Indosphere and his ideas of poetics set taste and provided inspiration for writers from Kashmir to Chang'an. In the Indic heartlands of the Ganges plains Dandin became an essential part of the curriculum at the universities of Nalanda and Vikramashila, where his work generated extensive commentaries.

Beyond, copies of his work left a paper and palm-leaf trail from the peaks of Tibet to the pagodas of Pagan and the monasteries of Thailand, through the jungles of Bali and the islands of Indonesia, to the cave monasteries of the Taklamakan, the steppes of Mongolia and even the literary salons of high Tang China, where Dandin's writings helped provoke a new court style. Along with Dandin's own work came the courtly Sanskrit classics which he referred to in his *Kavyadarsha*, such as Kalidasa's *Cloud Messenger*, which helped inspire a subgenre of messenger poems in Tibet and Sri Lanka, and the *Raghuvamsha* ('Lineage of Raghu'), which was much imitated as far away as Java and Bali.[26]

It is in the introduction of Dandin's *Beautiful Woman of Avanti* that we learn the details of the trip the poet made to the seaside at Mamallapuram. Dandin had been invited by Lalitalaya, the Pallava's head sculptor and architect, to inspect his handiwork at Mamallapuram. Here Lalitalaya had just restored an idol of Vishnu reclining on the beach 'where the water in the sea rose up in the form of blue mighty waves and washed the body'.[27]

This is probably the idol still visible at the Shore Temple which, then as now, faces on to the sea, though now, since the 2005 tsunami, it is protected from the full force of the waves by a massive embankment. It was Lalitalaya's job to restore the Vishnu sculpture created by his celebrated father, Mandhatar, 'who surpassed the Yavanas [Greeks] in artistry' and was renowned as the greatest artist of his day. Like some Tamil Leonardo, Mandhatar was also famous for his astonishing inventions, including an automaton, a mechanical man who could apparently speak the words 'I am hungry' in Tamil; he created a 'wish-granting tree' as well.[28]

The two friends Dandin and Lalitalaya eventually set off from Kanchipuram accompanied by a group of acquaintances, all south Indian celebrities, who included a couple of fellow writers, some intellectuals visiting from Kerala and the son of a general of the Pallava army known as the Battle Wrestler.

Today, Kanchipuram is slowly being swallowed up by the expanding outskirts of Chennai, whose suburbs stretch almost to the coast, where Mamallapuram has become a beach resort much in demand as a location for the song-and-dance scenes of the Tamil film industry. But when I first came here in the mid-1980s Mamallapuram was still little more than a village, home to a dynasty of sculptors descended from those who once worked here for the Pallavas, and it was easy then to transpose Dandin's journey on to that still-rural landscape.

The villages on the road from Kanchipuram were then like those in R. K. Narayan stories: small and sleepy, with roadside shops full of sacks of dried red chilli and freshly cut stalks of green bananas. Women in bright silk saris trooped along the roads with jasmine flowers in their hair. The villagers left their newly harvested grain on the road to be threshed by passing cars. The cattle were strong and white and their long

horns were painted red. Amid clouds of bronzed dragonflies, and lakes full of migrating storks, you passed into the coastal plain, through the dazzling green of rice paddy broken by windbreaks of Palmyra palms.

As you approached Mamallapuram, you began to pass strange, unearthly-looking ranges of silver boulders, glistening like giant beads of petrified mercury. The number of ruins littering the landscape suddenly increased: forgotten watchtowers and frontier forts busy and active at the time of Dandin lay long abandoned amid the paddy. Vine-covered walls, wells and stairways climbed up empty hills of jagged scree that were once bustling suburbs.

Beyond lay the gleaming rockface covered with the most elaborate sculpture in southern India, and beyond that the beach and the blue expanse of the sea. To one side, during Dandin's time, though now long vanished, was the King's Palace, 'its foundations washed by the playing ocean waves'. On the other side stood 'a lofty temple, all in white, with the tumultuous billows dashing against its base'.[29] This shore shrine was the object of Dandin's journey.

'After passing further along beaches strewn with fragments of pearls, and aromatic groves planted with aloe, mango, betel, coconut and numerous other trees,' wrote Dandin,

> with eyes blossoming wide in wonder, I beheld the Blessed One [the newly restored sculpture of Vishnu]. Toward his body came skipping the waves of the salt sea, darkened by a garland of blossoming blue lotuses. The God was being borne by the great serpent Shesha, with a wreath of coppery glances blazing from his thousand, wide-opened hoods … My head bowed, while my sins were washed clean, it seemed, by the drops of water from the ocean made pure by touching the deity's body. Finally, with an attentive eye, I examined the divine form.

This was the moment of truth. Could the friends see the join where Lalitalaya had mended the sculpture? Was his work 'worthy of the image which is a great work of art'? There was a moment of tension, but all was well:

> Unable to recognize anywhere the seam where the broken hand had been rejoined [by the sculptor], I looked at him and said, 'A supreme achievement of the art of sculpture, now sadly fallen into decay! But which is the hand you have reattached?' The great artist [Lalitalaya], his burden of worry suddenly removed, cupped his hands in reverence, bowed, and said, 'With this you have made my life complete!'[30]

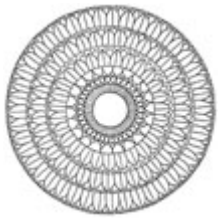
Many of the seafront sculptures that Dandin describes visiting in the seventh century are still there. In one cave, the goddess Durga charges irresistibly into battle on her roaring lion, armed with sword and bow and tilting against the horned water-buffalo demon Mahishasura, who recoils like a defeated Minotaur, his outsized club hanging uselessly at his side. Facing this image is another where Vishnu lies deep in his Cosmic Sleep protected by the cobra hoods of the Shesha-naga, as Lakshmi attempts to wake him to defeat the evil *asuras* Madhu and Kaitabha. Both are themes and compositions that would soon become popular in Hindu temples across the breadth of South-east Asia.

These sculptures remain, as Dandin realised, extraordinary masterworks, reflecting all the sophistication of the Pallava court at the peak of its influence. There are also glimpses of the same eclectic humour that Dandin deploys in his work. One small image at the base of the main relief retells the *Panchatantra* story of the cat who lived beside the Ganges and who used to preach to the local mice about his Enlightenment, his vegetarian abstinence and his great qualities of mercy – only then to feast upon his credulous audience. In the sculpture the cat stands on his hind legs in the pose of a fasting ascetic, while the adoring mice gather at his feet in rapt devotion.

What only emerges with a little more study, however, is the elevated literary game that the Pallava sculptors are playing here. Many of the characters on the Mamallapuram reliefs look as if they are illustrating the passage in the *Mahabharata* where the hero Arjuna undergoes years of penance in order to learn from Lord Shiva the secrets of the great apocalypse weapon of the gods: Pashupata. The same scenario, however, is sculpted so that it can also be read in a different direction as the equally famous story of the Descent of the Ganges from heaven to earth through the matted locks of Shiva – the Himalayas. The meaning is left open to individual interpretation: the same sort of ambiguous riddle that Mahendravarman Pallava enjoyed posing in his plays and which Dandin cultivated in his poetry and prose.[31]

This relief, known today as Arjuna's Penance, stood on the edge of the sea beneath the Pallava palace as a

very public advertisement for the cultural brilliance of the court. Today the relief is marooned a little inland, but originally it faced directly on to the harbour front. Just as the lighthouse of Alexandria marked the entrance of that great port, so this relief, visible from afar to ships out at sea, flanked by the double spires of the Shore Temple and its reclining Vishnu, washed by seawater, was the first thing that traders, scholars and pilgrims from South-east Asia would see when they came to visit the holy land whose religions were rapidly remaking their homelands.



The climax of Pallava rule did not just witness a remarkable cultural revival. It also saw an extraordinary economic turnaround, with busy markets and prosperous towns reviving after a period of prolonged urban decline.[32]

Partly this was stimulated by a rural revival, itself encouraged by the irrigation systems and canals dug as part of the public works the Pallava government carried out. In addition, the royal foundation and patronage of temples across the kingdom helped create a series of bustling towns that enabled the re-establishment of urban life. But the revival of prosperity was stimulated most of all by the rapidly growing international trade that was fast developing with the rich new city states of South-east Asia. By funnelling much of that trade through Mamallapuram, the Pallavas made sure that they were the principal beneficiary of that new eastward-facing trade boom.[33]

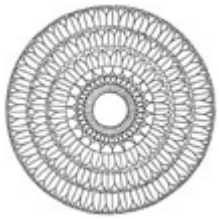
During the early fifth century ce, just as the Pallavas were first extending their rule from Kanchipuram and the Kaveri delta across the rest of Tamil country, trade with Rome and Byzantium, already negligible when compared to the days of Augustus, was shrinking fast as the Roman Empire itself began to crumble under internal tensions, palace coups and a series of full-scale invasions from across the Rhine and over the Caucasus.

The fall of the Western Roman Empire and the fraying and decay of much of urban life in northern and western Europe was followed by the incessant wars between Byzantium and Persia in the sixth century. This began with a partially successful Persian embargo on Roman trade with India which the Byzantine Emperor Justinian tried and failed to break. The Red Sea port of Myos Hormos was already in terminal decline by the fourth century; its rival Berenike was abandoned around 550 following a series of devastating raids by the much feared desert nomads the Byzantines called the Blemmyes.[34] The wide-ranging effects of this can be seen in the fact that this was also the time that much-sought Indian and Sri Lankan garnets disappear from jewellery in Merovingian France: for the first time in many hundreds of years, Indian imports were no longer able to reach Mediterranean Europe.[35]

After that there came the disruptions of the Arab Islamic conquests of the early seventh century, culminating in the conquest and plunder of Egypt in 640 ce. In time, the Arabs would revive the Red Sea trade, and with the foundation of Quseir, the new Islamic Red Sea port, Egypt would again become the terminus for a profitable trade with India; but for two centuries or so the western trade routes were stilled.[36] As the Roman trading fleets dwindled and then disappeared, the place of the Romans as the main trading partners of the ports of India was partially filled by the great Sasanian Persians and the Ethiopians of Axum, both of which empires were then at their peak.[37] Indeed, passing Persian vessels on their way to China play a major role in the travel tales of Buddhist monks wishing to catch ship eastwards.[38]

But this trade, important as it was, could not replace the extraordinary volumes of gold that had been pouring into India at the peak of the Roman Red Sea trade. As supplies of Mediterranean gold reaching India guttered in the fifth century, Indian overseas trade began to realign to face East. If gold was no longer arriving in massive quantities from Rome, then Indian merchants, managed and marshalled by a series of newly founded trading guilds, would have to bring it instead from the long coastlines and islands of Suvarnabhumi.[39]

As the Golden Road to the west began to close up, the eastern branch grew ever more important, as great fleets of Indian merchants began heading east.



Just as Mahendravarman Pallava was reviving the economy of the Tamil coast, the same alchemy of urbanisation and state formation in South-east Asia was increasing the size and wealth of the ports around the eastern shores of the Bay of Bengal, making voyages eastwards from Mamallapuram both easier and more profitable.[40]

In what is now Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Malaysia, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia, new urban centres were springing to life along the coast and up the major river systems. In what is now Thailand, for example, the river port of Nakhon Pathom, measuring 2.3 by 1.2 miles, had by this period a moat, with canals running through the town, and over a hundred buildings with brick bases.[41] It was to destinations such as this that south and east Indian traders were sailing with every eastward monsoon, carrying cargoes full of textiles, metal goods and other Indian manufactures which they exchanged for spices, camphor, resin and the other raw materials of the region. But in particular, as the name Suvarnabhumi indicates, the Indians came for the rich deposits of gold which had been found in Sumatra and Sarawak and in small gold mines dotted across the peninsula of the mainland.[42] By the fifth century a major direct sea route had opened up through the Straits of Malacca which easily linked the southern and eastern oceans. Much of the Indian end of this trade seems to have taken place under the umbrella of the increasingly prosperous trading guilds.[43]

Such voyages had long been a staple of the Buddhist Jataka tales.[44] One tale tells the story of Prince Polajanaka's voyage to Suvarnabhumi, to amass the wealth he would need if he was to recapture his father's throne, which had been usurped by his wicked brother. 'Give me half of your riches,' he tells his mother, 'and I will go to Suvarnabhumi and get great riches there.' His mother warns him that it will not be easy: 'The sea has few chances of success and many dangers.' Sure enough, the Prince's ships hit a storm. 'The water rose higher and higher,' and 'the ship began to sink in the middle of the ocean while the crew wept and lamented and invoked their different gods.'

As the ship founders and the sailors 'become food for the fishes and tortoises, and the water all round assumes the colour of blood', the Prince stands firm by the mast. He is eventually rescued by the miraculous intervention of Manimekhala, the Goddess of the Sea, who was particularly worshipped by the Pallavas of Kanchipuram. Manimekhala praises the Prince's courage:

> You who bravely fight on amidst this fierce unbounded sea
> Nor shrink from the appointed task, striving where duty calls you
> Go where your heart would have you go,
> No let nor hindrance shall there be.[45]

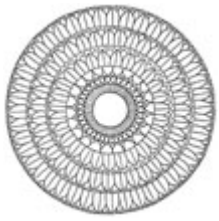
This seems to have been the spirit which drew the first merchants ever further eastwards.

Indeed, for all the pious literature about Suvarnabhumi in the Jatakas and epics such as the *Ramayana*, India's religions were initially slow to join the list of South Asian exports; and when Indian religions did establish a foothold in South-east Asia, Buddhism narrowly preceded Hinduism.

In Myanmar, for example, there are signs of Indic technical influence from the second century BCE in matters such as the hydraulic and irrigation systems, iron smelting and even brick sizes. Indic writing systems began to be used rather later, from the third century CE.[46] But it is not until the fourth century that there are clear signs of the widespread adoption of Buddhism. Evidence for monasteries comes even later. By the fifth century the oldest surviving inscriptions in Pali were forged in the Pyu city of Sriksetra: twenty gold leaves inscribed with Buddhist formulae were discovered here in the relic chamber of a stupa/pagoda.[47]

It is a similar story in Thailand, where Indian pottery has been dug up at early trading posts from the first century CE, but the Shiva lingam, Vishnu images and freestanding Buddhas, beautifully sculpted in the style of Amaravati, do not appear until the fourth century CE.[48] Soon after this there spring up the sculpted Buddhist *dharmachakras* or 'Wheels of the Law' that are a defining feature of the shadowy, Indic-influenced

Dvaravati kingdom which for nearly 400 years controlled part of central Thailand. These images stand on tall pillars and seem to be modelled on similar pillars erected in northern India during the Gupta period at Sarnath, the deer park where the Buddha gave his first sermon. But while only a handful of such images have ever been found in India, they were carved in great profusion in Dvaravarti, where over forty have so far been found.[49]



This burgeoning trade with South-east Asia in turn led to great changes in the new ports opening beyond Sri Lanka. It is in the early ports of the Mekong delta that have been found the earliest substantial architectural remains in mainland South-east Asia, amid the wreckage of the first major cities of what is now Vietnam and Cambodia. Here, in the wide freshwater lagoons of the Mekong delta, lie the waterlogged ruins of a network of ancient trading posts that now straddle the modern border.

Today, in the rainy season, the canals flood into such wide waterlands that they completely submerge the patchwork of paddy fields, leaving visible above the flood waters only the spires of Buddhist temples and the tops of the avenues of poplars lining the canals. The higher hills stand out as conical islands in the stream that look from a distance, as you chug towards them on a fishing boat, like the smooth curved backs of bathing elephants. From their summit, above the canopy of trees, rise the towers of some of the oldest temples in the region which look as if they might have been washed up by the monsoon floods.

On the Vietnamese side of the modern frontier lie the ruins of the ancient port city of Oc Eo. On the Cambodian side, two small hillocks rising out of the lagoon, and linked to Oc Eo by an ambitious network of canals, are what remains of the ancient Khmer trading posts and temple sites of Angkor Borei and Phnom Da.

Excavations have revealed the plans of these two sizeable trading towns in the delta, both with a geometrical layout arranged on Indic-inspired rectangular plans. Oc Eo flourished from 100 to 300 ce. Here were found coins from early India mixed with Roman currency dating from the period of Antoninus Pius. There is evidence for organised control of large groups of labourers shown by the building of ambitious public works. These include the construction of substantial brick walls and moats to surround the sites of both Angkor Borei, the earliest city, encircling around 750 acres, and Oc Eo, which is slightly later, where the ramparts encircle a full 1,100 acres with four ramparts and five parallel moats. This, in the opinion of the archaeologists, showed evidence of the early adoption of Indian ideas and models of urban planning by the rulers of South-east Asia. These were the modest beginnings of one of the most dramatic moments of cultural exchange and dialogue in world history: the extension of the Indosphere to include both sides of the Bay of Bengal.[50]

This lagoon separating the two ports, Oc Eo and Angkor Borei, became from the early centuries ce the terminus for the maritime trade route leading eastwards from Berenike and the Roman Red Sea ports via India. Roman luxuries are found distributed in prehistoric sites across the Gulf of Thailand and right along the Molucca Straits, with a few Roman glass beads even turning up as far away as Korea.[51] These were apparently brought not by the Romans themselves but by Indian middlemen who based themselves in these lagoons of the Mekong delta. Indian traders not only distributed their own ornaments and jewellery, but also shipped on many Roman products such as bronze lamps and even rather good counterfeit Roman intaglios manufactured in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. These seem to have been passed off in South-east Asia as the original Roman goods, rather like the fake Louis Vuitton and Gucci bags found in the region's bazaars today.[52]

The Chinese called this city state Funan – the Indians, Vyadhapura. We do not know what it was called by its own inhabitants. A Chinese court envoy who came to Funan in the third century ce left the first eyewitness portrait of this nascent trading world. 'This place is famous for precious rarities from afar,' wrote the Chinese Xue Zong in the third century ce: 'pearls, incense, elephant tusks, rhinoceros' horn, tortoise shell, coral, lapis lazuli, parrots, kingfishers, peacocks, rare and abundant treasures enough to satisfy all desires.' The area became famed in the Chinese courts as the source of miraculous goods,

unavailable back home, particularly the best aloes wood: 'It is like something belonging to the immortals … Light one stick and the whole house is filled with a fragrant mist which is still there after three days.'[53] An impression emerges of a rich port city to which the forest dwellers of the interior would bring their goods to trade. Waiting for them in the lagoon would be the boats from India, Persia and beyond, full of traders eager to buy their produce for export. The kings of Funan grew rich as intermediaries between these worlds.[54]

The canals across the lagoon linking Angkor Borei to Oc Eo radiate out with great geometrical precision through the wide waterlands of the lagoon, linking the trading posts and early sacred sites. These clustered on the smooth volcanic hills which rise from the monsoon-drenched floodplains. Rich from trade, the ethnic Khmer kingdom of Funan began to dominate the wider Mekong region. According to an early Chinese history, the *Annals of the Liang Dynasty*: '[The King of Funan] used troops to attack the neighbouring kingdoms, which acknowledged themselves as his vassals. Then he ordered the construction of great ships and, crossing over the Gulf of Siam, attacked ten more kingdoms.'[55]

On both sides of the Bay of Bengal, trade was the key that unlocked economic growth, while it was control of trade that oiled the cogs of political development and led to the emergence of these first coastal city states.[56] Despite numerous excavations, almost no South-east Asian or Chinese goods have yet been recovered in prehistoric or early historic levels in India. It was thus probably Indian merchants who did most of the travelling, although – given that the early shipwrecks so far discovered in South-east Asian waters were of South-east Asian construction – some of these Indian merchants may well have travelled from island to island, port to port, on Malay or Indonesian vessels. These ships were often of prodigious size and were the single thing that most impressed the Chinese envoys. 'The large ones are more than fifty metres in length,' wrote one ambassador as early as the third century ce. 'They carry from six to seven hundred persons, with 10,000 bushels [c.600 tons] of cargo.'[57]

The reports filed by the Chinese emissary Kang Tai confirm this and offer a window into what he saw as an unusually cosmopolitan state where the inhabitants were hung with gold and which already had begun to mix Indic and South-east Asian customs. He writes to the Emperor about the first tenuous signs of the spread of Buddhism and Hinduism, and reports on his meetings with envoys from kings in India, who had arrived with gifts of four Central Asian horses. He also relates that the people of Funan:

> live in walled cities, palaces, and their houses are built on wooden piles [allowing for the annual monsoon inundation of the waters of the delta] … They devote themselves to agriculture. In one year they sow and harvest for three [that is, one planting will provide harvests for three years before they have to replant] … Taxes are paid in gold, silver, pearls, and perfumes … There are books and depositories of archives. Their characters for writing resemble those of the Hu.[58]

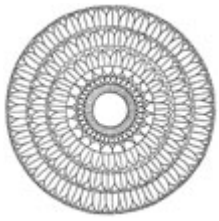
The script Kang Tai is referring to was based on a form of south Indian Brahmi. By the third century south Indian variants of this script were already in widespread use in South-east Asia, initially giving the names of owners on rings, seals, talismans and shards of pottery, then rather later appearing on stone, in formal inscriptions.[59]

Among the finds in Oc Eo and Angkor Borei were objects holding clues to the beginnings of the remarkable revolution which would soon be brought by the spread of Indian trade: the wholesale adoption of Indic religion, languages, art and culture across South-east Asia. It was here, in the early Mekong ports, that the French archaeologists believe this crucial transformation began.

In the lower layers of their excavations, the archaeologists found many imported Indian trade goods but, initially at least, no signs at all of Indic religions: there were shards of Indian terracotta containing writing in the Indian Brahmi script, a south Indian iron dagger and Indian glass beads, as well as Roman intaglios and coins of the Sasanian Persian shahs. Then, rather later, in the middle layers, closer to the surface, there appear the first simple wooden images of the Buddha, miraculously well preserved by that waterlogged environment. These date from the early third century ce, a full 800 years after the Buddha's death.[60] Finally, in the late third century ce emerges a huge and anatomically very lifelike Shiva lingam. It seems to borrow from specifically south Indian Pallava models which illustrate the myth in which Shiva asserts his primacy as Creator of the Universe by appearing to his squabbling rivals Brahma and Vishnu in a pillar of fire, here represented by Lord Shiva's face appearing on the shaft of a lingam.[61] The lingam was found within an arrangement of burned stumps and in the context of a rectangular building with verandahs and

brick terraces. The French archaeologists who dug Oc Eo believe these to be the foundations and pillars of an early wooden temple, the first known Hindu structure in the region.[62]

These are the modest beginnings of a trajectory of steadily accelerating Indian influence and the growth of an Indosphere that would culminate, many centuries later, in the stupas of Borobudur and the mighty quincunx of towers at Angkor Wat.[63]



By the fifth century we begin to have textual evidence of a series of Indian Buddhist missionary monks stopping over in the region as they travel between India and China.

One of the first of these was a former Kashmiri prince named Gunavarman who, 'having no fear of voyaging', arrived in Java via Sri Lanka in 422 ce on a missionary journey that eventually took him, and his two shiploads of Sri Lankan nuns, to Guangzhou and hence to the imperial Chinese court. En route, Gunavarman converted the royal family of Java to Buddhism with the aid of 'wonderous fragrances wafting in the air when he meditated' and 'a dragon-like creature which ascended to heaven in his presence'.[64]

By 500 ce a sailor from Bengal, 'the great sea-captain Buddhagupta', had had a large commemorative stele decorated with an image of a stupa raised for himself in Kedah on the Malay peninsula, along with a memorial inscription in south Indian Pallava Grantha script.[65] By 650 ce a rock-cut relief in central Thailand was showing the Buddha preaching to an attentive audience of Shiva and Vishnu. The Buddha here is both higher and larger, but the two Hindu gods are shown in regal rather than devotional stances and are attentive rather than deferential; nearby a Hindu holy man kneels in worship. Both the concept and the iconography of this carving have no parallel in India.[66]

This free mixing of Hinduism and Buddhism is a striking feature of South-east Asian religion from this time onwards. As a Chinese report noted, 'The people all learn the Brahminical writings and greatly reverence the law of the Buddha.' The Buddha and the Hindu gods accommodated each other and often appear folded in with local religious practices including ancestor worship, fertility ceremonies, and *naga* and *yakshi* worship as well as other spirit cults.[67]

In the fifth century, the early Shiva lingams found in Oc Eo begin to be complemented by small, squat, four-armed figurines of Vishnu wearing a conical, fez-like mitre and a cherubic smile, with his conch raised in his hand. There are also small figurines of the Hindu goddess Durga who stands on the severed head of a buffalo.[68] These small, hand-held statuettes were soon being manufactured on a remarkably large scale across the Mekong delta, sometimes in stone and sometimes in bronze, the latter using the same lost-wax technique mastered by the Pallavas during the reign of Mahendravarman.[69] The idols may originally have been used as guardian deities (or 'patron saints') by intrepid Indian merchants, but they evidently soon became popular with the local Khmers of Funan as hundreds have been discovered in the various archaeological sites across the delta.

From the beginning, those sculpted in Cambodia have Khmer anatomy and physiognomy, and are stylistically distinct from their Indian models. Quite quickly, for example, the long skirts of the Tamil *dhoti* on the Indian versions of the figurine give way to a much shorter Khmer wrap.[70] This is important, for it shows that from the very beginning of 'Indianised' art in South-east Asia local artists and their patrons felt able to choose what aspects of Indian models they were interested in and had full control over what they wanted to adopt, adapt or completely discard.[71]

Large-scale monumental sculpture followed quickly on from the production of the small votive idols. The wooded hill of Phnom Da rises up directly from the shores of the Mekong delta, linked by long straight canals leading across the waters of the lagoon from Oc Eo. It is home to some of the earliest known shrines of Vishnu in South-east Asia.

There a huge statue of Krishna was discovered, hands raised to hold up the bulk of Mount Govardhan above him, tensed for action in what the great art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy called 'a miraculous concentration of energy' and closely echoing a similar image carved in Mamallapuram.[72] As at Pallava Mamallapuram, the statues were installed in a cave facing on to the major seaport at the terminus of a long-

distance trade route. It now seems probable that the Krishna statue was erected at the place which was revered as the site of the founding Khmer myth: the place where the newly arrived Indian Brahmin Kaundinya was believed to have met and married local Mera the *naga* princess (we will hear more of this myth shortly). By erecting a major temple there to Lord Krishna, 'Phnom Da becomes a new Mount Govardhan, and probably, by extension, the Mekong River becomes the holy river Yamuna,' thereby ritually extending the sacred geography of India to South-east Asia.[73]

As if to confirm this, nearby, dotted around the two peaks of the mountain, several other superb, larger than life-size statues of the different incarnations of Vishnu have been found, each equally full of strength, power and life. The greatest, now one of the masterworks of the National Museum in Phnom Penh, shows an eight-armed Lord Vishnu, gleaming, bare-chested and tight-bodied, standing regally in a Khmer sarong, his hands bristling with symbols of his power and weapons of war: fire, a sceptre, an antelope skin, a club, a broken pedestal, a clump of grass, a thunderbolt and an ewer containing the nectar of immortality.[74]

Around the same time, c.600 ce, the first 'daily uninterrupted readings' of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, along with gifts of manuscripts of the *Ramayana* and the Puranas, are recorded in Khmer inscriptions. Almost simultaneously, thousands of miles away, on the opposite shore of the ocean, Mahendravarman Pallava was establishing a similar endowment in the Tamil country.[75]

Similar stone temples that once held these magnificent idols appear at the same moment on the shores of the Pallava Mamallapuram and on the beachheads of South-east Asia. After the earliest temples of the Mekong delta, probably the next oldest group of Hindu temples in South-east Asia lies in the highlands of central Java, on the Dieng plateau. This was once the location of a Brahminical 'priestly city'. Here some 400 Pallava-style shrines and temples were built between 675 and 725 on a dramatic site within the rim of a crater of a still-active volcano.

Their towers, then as now, stand occluded by plumes of sulphurous steam belching out of geysers. Eerily shrouded in mist, they lie close to bubbling mud and mineral springs where steam mingles with thick cloudbanks, which then scuds upwards through the bamboo slopes and on into forests of teak and mahogany. This otherworldly place, still known locally as the Place of the Deified Ancestors, has long been associated with ancestor worship and the manifestation of invisible spirits through mediums in pre-Hindu Java.[76] From the seventh century, it became in addition a place of residence for the Hindu gods. It is not necessarily easy to guess what layers of meaning this transformation entailed and how the complex was perceived and understood at the time by the indigenous people of Java. Clearly they did not abandon their earlier beliefs, but instead braided the old and the new together.[77]

This can be seen visually in the stone temples of the latest south India design erected within the crater of the volcano. Most of the temples here are built in a style strikingly similar to the Shore Temple at the Pallava port of Mamallapuram and feature the same saints and deities favoured in the Pallava heartlands, such as the sage Agastya, who was honoured as the man who brought the faith to the Dravidian south.[78] But they are not copies. Though many Pallava ideas and designs reappear far from home, none of the Dieng plateau shrines are directly modelled on any one Indian temple, and several features, such as the tall and elegantly elongated doorways, are unique to Java. Most of the upper storeys of these temples have upturned corner accents, presumably typical of wooden Javanese prototypes and resembling Chinese flying eaves.[79]

This contrasts with the way, for example, that Doric Greek temples spread to Sicily during the Hellenistic period, following the precise formulae and orders invented in mainland Greece as early as the sixth century bce. The likelihood is that the Javanese temples were influenced partially by the master masons' first-hand familiarity with Pallava models but also by using Indic handbooks on the practical arts (*shilpa*) and architecture (*vastu*) and by the traditions of the local builders and artisans. Both would have been crucial to the transmission of knowledge from India and its local realisation.[80]

By 782 ce, the great Sri Lankan Mahayana monastery of Abhayagiri founded a branch in Java, rather as a powerful modern corporate might open a franchise in a new capital city. The monastery, which mirrors many of the architectural features of its Sri Lankan model, notably the unusual meditation platforms, stands in a prominent position on the terraces of the same hilltop as the royal Sailendra palace not far from modern Yogyakarta.[81] A century later, an exiled prince of the same Sailendra dynasty repaid the cultural debt the dynasty owed to Indian Buddhism by establishing, and generously endowing, a monastery college at Nalanda.[82]

The monsoon winds were bringing the two sides of the Indian Ocean into ever-closer contact, drawing them together along the eastern branch of the Golden Road into a single cultural and geographical unit

within the wider Indosphere. The two sides of the Bay of Bengal had very similar climates, grew very similar crops and relied on rice as a staple crop. In both areas, elephants were reared for labour, transport and war; in both, buffaloes were sacrificed and the natural features in the landscape – mountains, caves, springs and rivers – were sacralised. In both, there was a strong popular belief in tree and serpent deities. On both sides of the Bay, urbanisation was enhanced by the worship of the gods and the teachings of the Buddha, and by the need to construct wealthy temples which then acted as ceremonial centres for the new cities.

In many ways, India no longer ended in Tamil Nadu, but now extended to the other side of the Bay of Bengal. The two shores of the ocean formed part of one integral maritime unit, an Indosphere sharing a common culture and sacred language, a Sanskritic union of monsoon Asia. Here both sides of the Bay were now clearly undergoing parallel cultural and religious transformations. At this eastern terminus of the Golden Road, the monsoon-blown waters of the Bay of Bengal did not divide but instead connected and united.[83]

In the Lands of Gold

7

It was the vortex of seabirds that first gave away the position of the wreck.

They were circling over the spot, greedily diving and hunting down the thick shoals of fish which had concentrated there. The fish, in turn, had gathered around the wreck's projecting timbers. The local fishermen knew the signs, and they tipped off the divers.[1]

It was only when a sudden glut of ancient ceramics started appearing in Singapore antique shops in 1997 that the authorities were alerted to the find. The unusual depth of the wreck – 250 feet down – meant that most of the objects were still in place when the navy moved in to arrest the divers, seize their loot and bring in the marine archaeologists instead.[2]

Lying on the seabed near the Intan oil field in the Java Sea, long forgotten and almost perfectly preserved, was the wreck of a ninety-foot-long, four-sailed, 300-ton trading ship. The ship was only 150 miles from port off the coast of Java when it broke apart some time in the early tenth century and went down with all hands, probably the victim of a sudden monsoon storm. The crew and cargo lay forgotten on the floor of the Java Sea for over a thousand years.

By the turn of the millennium, the salvage divers had carried to the surface all that survived of the vessel's rich cargo. The finds were described by one of the archaeologists as simply 'astounding'. The ship had been carrying a large consignment of Indian steel weapons and Bengali brass lion-head finials. Load by load, the divers brought up more and more of the goods: bottles from Thailand, glass from the Middle East and great quantities of fine Chinese ceramics including costly white porcelain, as well as 20,000 Chinese stoneware pots and a batch of Chinese silver ingots, each stamped 'high-grade silver, certified by officer Chen Xun'. Multiple hinges from now lost wooden chests hinted that the most valuable cargo may have been textiles: Indian cotton or Chinese silk, or maybe both.[3] There was even a ship's compass – a new technological breakthrough in the tenth century.

What took the archaeologists aback was the degree to which the finds exactly matched the material world illustrated in the sculpture galleries of the nearby pilgrimage site of Borobudur in Java. Begun around 760 and completed about seventy years later in 830 ce, Borobudur is quite simply the largest and most sophisticated Buddhist monument in the world: a *mandala*-shaped step pyramid, fusing into stone, on a massive scale, a number of complex and highly esoteric Buddhist concepts. Within its galleries, illustrating these ideas, are successive tiers of superbly sculpted Buddhist scripture.

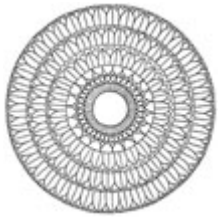
The Intan wreck is clearly linked to the sophisticated courtly circle that created this extraordinary

monument. Up from the seafloor came the same earrings and pendants and beads that are worn by the court women of Java in the sculptures, even the same bronze vanity mirrors they can be seen using while combing their hair and putting on make-up. There were also gold ring-weights, made and used by jewellers to measure expensive raw materials, found lying alongside the jewellers' creations themselves.[4]

There were carved ivory and wooden doors from Bengal destined for a temple in South-east Asia and a lot of ritual Buddhist paraphernalia, most of it apparently smelted in Sumatra and intended for export: bronze Buddhist statuettes, moulds for portable shrines and masks representing Kala, the Demon of Time; ceremonial spears, vessels and bells; and a haul of Buddhist ritual sceptres called *vajras* or 'thunderbolts' that were used by Tantric monks as magical weapons as well as symbols of power.

The wreck reveals the world of the early medieval Bay of Bengal, frozen in time. Here Indian ideas, philosophies and arts were now blossoming into extravagant new forms far from home and on a vastly larger scale than anything seen in their original, politically fractured homeland. For in this period the new empires of South-east Asia, grown rich on the spice and gold trade, had amassed the resources to develop Indic ideas more extravagantly than any of the relatively small kingdoms which then divided India between them.[5]

Most of the salvaged finds from the Intan wreck were Indian and Buddhist and were apparently destined for the predominantly Buddhist islands of Java and Sumatra, then dominated by the shadowy maritime empire of Srivijaya, 'Fortune's Victory', and ruled by the equally opaque Sailendra dynasty. Although the history of this thalassocracy is elusive, and what is known is only fleetingly sketched out in the handful of surviving inscriptions, Sumatra and Java together clearly formed one of the Buddhist world's most important spiritual centres and a major pilgrimage destination, by the period of the wreck attracting both traders and devotees from as far away as Gujarat and China.[6]



Of all the Indian Buddhists who successfully completed the journey from South Asia over the waves of the Bay of Bengal to the shores of the South China Sea, none made more of an impression than a Tantric master named Vajrabodhi (671–741).

Vajrabodhi was a Pallava prince who became in some ways south India's answer to Merlin, a wonder-working Buddhist monk and custodian of secret texts, who was clearly a man of extraordinary learning and charisma. He claimed the power of creating downpours with the aid of magical rain dragons and to know mantras, or spells, capable of destroying enemy armies and even of bringing the dead back to life. As Hinduism became increasingly popular in India, Buddhist holy men needed to offer more to their patrons in order to compete with the now dominant Brahmins. With his extravagant claims to extraordinary powers, the terrifyingly powerful figure of Vajrabodhi, clutching his *vajra* thunderbolt wand, was at the forefront of the new movement of Tantric Buddhism. This was a man who had much to offer the warrior kings and emperors of his day, and they were soon competing for his favour.

Vajrabodhi was born as a prince into a Buddhist branch of the Pallava dynasty in 671 ce.[7] He was only nine when he was sent to Nalanda to study. He returned to spend the years 701–8 in south India, where he received his initiation into secret Tantric texts and yogic formulae and rituals, allegedly passed on to him in an 'iron stupa' somewhere in Tamil Nadu: 'There was nothing in the treasury of the Buddha's secrets he did not master.'[8]

Vajrabodhi became particularly renowned for his expertise in building *mandalas*: magical shapes, alignments and cosmic diagrams in coloured sand or painting that could be transformed by rituals to initiate adepts to higher levels of spiritual power. They also allowed the adept to awaken the gods and to summon and visualise supernatural beings, Bodhisattvas and wrathful deities who could then be used for whatever magical purpose the Tantric master wished. In particular, Vajrabodhi was believed to have the power to call at will the most powerful and omniscient of Bodhisattvas, Lord Vairocana, the Cosmic Buddha. In this way he could work powerful miracles and wonders which could give protection and prosperity to just kings and ensure the subjugation of their internal and external enemies, human, divine

and demonic.

Vajrabodhi was summoned home by his royal Pallava cousins to Kanchipuram to bring rain during a terrible three-year drought in 708. After successfully precipitating an unseasonal monsoon awash with the 'sweet beneficence of rain, after which the king and his ministers rejoiced', Vajrabodhi stayed on in the monasteries of Kanchipuram for three years 'in a temple they built for His Reverence' in gratitude.

In 711, Vajrabodhi seems to have been sent, as some sort of Pallava ambassador, to the Tang Emperor of China by the new monarch of Kanchipuram, Narasimhavarman III.[9] Understanding the renown of Vajrabodhi's Tantric power in the eyes of his contemporaries, the Pallava king decided to use his wonder-working cousin for his own purposes. Narasimha judged that the monk was the one man of sufficient standing, charisma and fame to push through a military alliance with the Tang Chinese in order to help confront two new threats which had just appeared on the horizon. To the west, the Ummayyad Arab armies had just conquered Sindh and were now raiding deep into India. To the north, the rising power of the Tibetan Empire, advancing from their Himalayan strongholds, had begun sacking the Indian plains.[10]

As part of his effort to woo the Tang Emperor, Narasimhavarman first built in his honour a Buddhist pagoda and stupa in his new port of Nagapattinam, which he then invited the Emperor to name. He even sent along with Vajrabodhi his most distinguished general, a man known in Chinese sources as Mizhunna.[11]

'Your studies have now been completed,' said the King to Vajrabodhi. 'Go to the Middle Kingdom and pay your respects to the Bodhisattva Manjushri [whose shrine on Mount Wutai had become a major site of Buddhist pilgrimage]. You should go to spread the teachings and save all beings.' He also despatched rich presents including 'a Sanskrit copy of the sutras, a chair adorned with seven precious materials, a gold bracelet, earrings inlaid with jewels, armour, Borneo camphor and various spices and aromatics'.[12]

With his courtly escort, Vajrabodhi's Pallava embassy left for the port of Nagapattinam from where he first took ship to Sri Lanka. Here the monarch was a Pallava client whose dynasty had earlier been installed on the throne by force of Pallava arms; the King welcomed Vajrabodhi with fragrant flowers. There Vajrabodhi made a pilgrimage to the Buddha's footprints on Adam's Peak:

> That mountain had many ferocious beasts, lions, poisonous snakes, savages, and *rākṣasa* demons. Dark winds and a cruel fog constantly protect the rare treasures on top of this mountain. Unless one is paying one's respects to the sacred sites, it is not possible to climb this mountain. His Reverence burned incense at the foot of the mountain and made obeisance … the sky cleared, the fog dispersed, and the ferocious beasts hid themselves. Ascending, they turned towards the northwest, exploring valleys, grasping lianas, and hanging on to creepers … There was a spring, and in it there were nothing but lapis lazuli, gold, silver, jewels and blue lotus flowers. They came across caves where earlier monks had cultivated the Way. They climbed for seven days, and only then did they reach the summit of the mountain … The Buddha's right footprint was hidden on top of the stone.[13]

On his descent, Vajrabodhi then went to the great Mahayana monastery of Abhayagiri in the capital, Anuradhapura. There he worshipped the relic of the Buddha's tooth and obtained copies of several powerful esoteric Buddhist texts, which he copied and brought with him on the next stage of his journey.[14]

Vajrabodhi's next stop, in 717 ce, was Sumatra, then a central part of the maritime empire of Srivijaya. This powerful thalassocracy, a confederation of South-east Asian Sea Lords, had its centre in Palembang in Sumatra, a rich riverine port perched on wooden piles emerging from the River Musi, deep in the jungle.

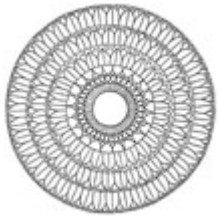
From the fifth century, the sea lords of Srivijaya had sailed out to control the Straits of Malacca and establish a series of ports and dependencies stretching around the region. They bound themselves to their raja with magical rituals that involved the pouring of water over a massive sculpture of a fearsome *naga* serpent. The water was then drunk with a vow that the lords' entrails would rot if they should break their oath. On the other hand, if the lords remained faithful, each would receive not only a secret formula for the final Buddhist liberation of his soul but also the pledge, 'You will not be swallowed [by snakes] with your children and wives.'[15] This was the sort of place where Vajrabodhi could expect to flourish.

By the eighth century Srivijaya was beginning to eclipse the once mighty Mekong delta port of Funan as the principal power in South-east Asia and had become a major source of perfumes, spices, resin and other exotic goods for both the Pallava and the Tang courts.[16] The rich Srivijayan capital of Palembang, the Venice of Sumatra, was already the preferred midway stopping point for travellers moving between the two.

This was where Empress Wu Zetian's favoured monk, Yijing, chose to base himself for several months on his way back to China after his studies at Nalanda. In his memoirs he advised his monastic readers that if they wished to study Sanskrit or the latest Buddhist theology, there was no longer any need for them to make the long pilgrimage to the Buddhist sites of India: the many sophisticated Buddhist monasteries of Srivijaya, a short trip across the South China Sea, would do equally well. 'There are here more than one thousand Buddhist monks whose spirit is only turned to study and good actions,' he wrote. 'They study all possible subjects like in India. Rules and ceremonies are identical. If a Chinese monk wants to travel to India to listen and read Buddhist laws, he must stay in Fo-che [Palembang] for one or two years to learn how to behave properly. He can then pursue his travel to India.'[17]

It was in a Buddhist monastery in Java in 718 that Vajrabodhi first met his future protégé Amoghavajra (705–74), the fourteen-year-old nephew of a trader from (depending which biography you believe) Samarkand or Sri Lanka, who would in time become, along with Vajrabodhi, one of the two most powerful monks in Asia.

The two became close, and Vajrabodhi initiated him into the first of the several Tantric orders of empowerment up whose ranks he would quickly ascend.[18]



In 719, the two monks headed on towards China, hitching a lift with a passing fleet of thirty-five Persian vessels which 'had come to trade in precious stones … each carrying more than five or six hundred persons'. Then disaster struck. 'When we were all crossing in convoy in the very middle of the great ocean we ran into a typhoon,' wrote Vajrabodhi.

> All the ships were tossed about, and the ship I was on was about to be inundated. At that time, I always kept the two scriptures I was bringing nearby so I could do the requisite offerings … I aroused my mind in meditation and performed the [Tantric] rite for eliminating disasters. The typhoon immediately abated, and for a quarter mile around the ship, water did not move … Bit by bit, we got to the shore.[19]

Having finally reached Guangzhou, Vajrabodhi and Amoghavajra made their way overland to the Chinese capital of Chang'an, where the Empress Wu Zetian had accumulated her vast repository of Buddhist learning.[20] Here one of Vajrabodhi's diplomatic gifts, a talking parrot, caused a great stir; but more remarkable gifts were to follow. For in Chang'an, in front of the new Tang Emperor, Xuanzong, one of the sons of Wu Zetian, Vajrabodhi once again worked the magical rainmaking skills that had endeared him to the Pallava court. 'Since the first moon of that year it had not rained for five months,' wrote one historian.

> Prayer was offered at the sacred temples of mountains and rivers without result, so the emperor ordered Vajrabodhi to set up an altar to pray for rain. Northwest winds began at once to blow [so heavily] that the tiles on the roofs were lifted and trees were uprooted. The clouds dropped their rain. The people far and wide were astonished. A hole was torn in the roof above the altar and heavy rain poured into the hall. Next morning, people of high and low degree in the capital asserted that Vajrabodhi had seized a dragon which had jumped up through the roof, and thousands of people daily sought to see the place.

In the years that followed, Vajrabodhi and Amoghavajra joined the circle of Tantric Buddhist monks that had first gathered in Chang'an around the Empress Wu Zetian and which now enjoyed the patronage of her successor. In time they became some of the most prolific writers and translators in Buddhist history. They brought new Indic ideas of cosmology, reincarnation, drug prescription, astronomy, horoscopic astrology, ritual magic, calendrical computation and planetary predictions to the Chinese court from Nalanda, Pallava Kanchipuram and Sri Lanka.[21] They also built temples and set up altars in the capital and on Mount Wutai, for Tantric rituals for the benefit of the empire. This Vajrabodhi achieved through a new and very powerful form of Tantric yoga, the Yoga of the Adamantine Crown, into which he and Amoghavajra initiated pupils

across China.[22]

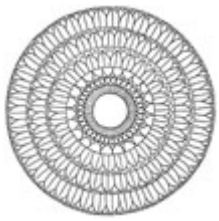
Meanwhile the texts, statues and paintings that the monks had brought with them or created themselves subtly shifted the course of art history: strong Pallava iconographic and artistic influence has been found on the murals at the Buddhist cave complex at Dunhuang, on the edge of the Gobi and Taklamakan deserts. A set of Javanese bronzes bear a strikingly close relationship with an unusual eighth-century twelve-armed image of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara at Nalanda which seems to have been modelled on an original, portable figurine brought to the island by Vajrabodhi. Among his other talents, Vajrabodhi was a skilled artist and painter and diligently instructed his disciples on the esoteric art forms and iconographies of Pallava art.[23]

Vajrabodhi eventually died in China in 741. After the death of his master, Amoghavajra returned to India and Sri Lanka to access more esoteric texts before returning with them to China. In his final testament, he gave a short account of his life: 'I left home as a child,' he wrote,

> and relying on the Master [Vajrabodhi] I sought Indic texts for more than twenty years. Day and night, I studied diligently. I humbly received his counsel and accepted the Law of Yoga in 4000 verses. Alas, he eventually became ill and the Master's life came to an end. Living without anyone to rely on, on whom could I depend? Thus I distantly roamed to India – traversing the perilous sea, everywhere studying yoga, and personally honouring the remains of the Sage. There I obtained the 10,000 verse Seal of the Law Treasury, which I transmitted, returning to the land of the Emperor, practicing conversion. In this way I served as the master of three generations of Emperors. To these Lords of Men, I exhaustively conferred the secret yoga and transmitted the seal of the Law.[24]

In addition to initiating successive Chinese emperors and their courts into Tantric mysteries, Amoghavajra used his now enhanced skills to protect the imperial order and defeat the Tang's enemies during a period of rebellion and unrest:

> An edict was issued summoning Amoghavajra to court as the city of Anxi had been surrounded by enemy troops of the five nations …
>
> Amoghavajra said, 'Your Majesty should carry an incense burner to the place where I will conduct the ritual. And your Majesty should pray to the Heavenly King of the North to send divine troops to save them.' The Emperor quickly entered the ritual area and prayed. Before Amoghavajra had recited the secret words twice seven times, the Emperor suddenly saw two to three hundred divine beings wearing gold armour …
>
> In the fourth month of the year, a memorial came from Anxi, which said [that on the same day Amoghavajra had prayed] to the north-east of the city dark cloud and fog appeared. In the fog were beings who were ten feet tall … and all wore gold armour. After dusk came the sound of drums and loud cries … The trembling of the earth stopped only after three days … The frightened troops of the five nations had all retreated … Moreover, golden rats chewed the strings of bows and crossbows and destroyed their weapons so none could be used.[25]



Vajrabodhi and Amoghavajra have long been recognised as the most powerful and influential monks of their day. But it is only recently that new excavations and research have shown that their most extraordinary legacy has been hiding in plain sight.

It now appears likely that the plan of the greatest Buddhist structure ever built – the great three-dimensional *mandala* of Borobudur with its symbolism linked to the yogic *chakras* and complex Tantric cosmograms and numerology – was based specifically on the texts that the two Tantric masters had brought with them from India.

Built on a hilltop between two rivers, the monument takes the form of a *mandala*-shaped step pyramid in

three tiers. At the bottom is a pyramid base with five concentric square terraces, out of which emerges the trunk of a cone with three circular platforms, each of diminishing size, symbolically mirroring the sacred slopes of Mount Meru. A stupa crowns the final tier at the top. It is made up of nearly two million blocks of stone.[26] Five hundred and four statues of the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas look out in the cardinal directions, locked deep in meditation, focused within as they hover on the threshold of Enlightenment. Beneath and around them, some 3,000 Buddhist narrative panels instruct devotees on the essence of desire, suffering, karma, rebirth and the ethics of *dharma*.[27]

The history of Borobudur has always been mysterious. Surprisingly there is no great temple or palace complex associated with it. It is usually assumed to have been built by the Buddhist kings of the Sailendra dynasty, 'the Lords of the Mountains'; but there is precious little evidence for this beyond one single surviving inscription. This is dated 842, and records a donation of land by a Sailendra princess to an unnamed Buddhist sanctuary. Recently, however, archaeologists digging around Borobudur have found, less than a hundred yards from the monument, a fragment of a *dharani* (a Buddhist mantra or spell) inscription that invokes a fierce form of the Bodhisattva Vajrapani, revealing a close link with the esoteric Vajrayana Buddhist movement of Amoghavajra and Vajrabodhi.[28] It seems likely that the architect of Borobudur was one of their Javanese Tantric disciples, probably the monk known in the biographies under the Chinese version of his name, Bianhong.[29]

We know a little about Bianhong as he appears in the writings of one of Amoghavajra's pupils, Huiguo (746–805), who in turn was the teacher not just of Bianhong but also of Kukai, a towering figure in the history of Japanese Buddhism who is held responsible for the transmission of esoteric Tantra to Japan. According to his biographer, Bianhong had been planning to travel from Java to India to gain admission to a Tantric lineage, but then heard that Amoghavajra was in China and instructing devotees there:

> Bianhong, a monk of the country of Heling [Java] was in his native land practicing [esoteric] yoga and had attained some degree of spiritual power. On suddenly hearing that the teachings of Vairocana's Maṇḍala of the Matrix of Great Compassion were to be found in South India, he fervently yearned to study them and set out.
>
> On the way he met a strange man who asked, 'Where are you going?' He replied, 'I have heard it said that the great teachings of the Matrix are to be found in South India. I yearn in my heart to study them, and therefore I have taken the road.' That person informed him, 'Those teachings have been taken by *Ācārya* Amoghavajra and transmitted to the land of the Great Tang. His pupil, the *Ācārya* Huiguo, is presently in Chang'an, where he is giving instruction. If you go there, you will be able to receive them, but otherwise they will be difficult to obtain.'
>
> When he had finished speaking, the man vanished. It is thus evident that he was a divine being. Bianhong immediately turned back and set out for the Great Tang. He eventually met His Reverence [Huiguo] and explained in detail the purpose of his visit, offering him one seven-gemmed initiation flask, one bronze bowl, three conch shells, and various famed aromatics. His Reverence held an initiation [ceremony] for him and conferred on him the great teachings of the Matrix.[30]

In due course Bianhong became such an authority on the subject of *mandalas* that he wrote a text entitled the *Ritual Manual for Initiation into the Great Mandala*.[31] The most plausible current theory to explain the extraordinarily arcane and complex Buddhist symbolism of Borobudur is that Bianhong returned home to Java from China, bringing with him the secret *mandalas* developed by his Tantric lineage in Pallava Kanchipuram and that he planned Borobudur as a three-dimensional representation of one of these, using Vajrabodhi's writings as his guide.[32] The idea of building a stupa whose power was enhanced by surrounding it with a three-dimensional *mandala* was an idea pioneered in the vicinity of Nalanda, at the stupa of Kesariya in Bihar, and at the massive Paharpur stupa at Sompura Mahavihara in Bangladesh, a monumental cruciform stupa that was probably the immediate precursor for the larger and still more intricate structure at Borobudur.[33]

Both monuments are arranged so that the pilgrim vanishes into the *mandala* and is immersed within its maze. By walking the galleries and circumambulating every terrace, he absorbs the teachings of the panels carved on both sides. It is, in other words, less a place for worship or meditation than a Tantric training programme to assist the pilgrim on his journey to become a Bodhisattva.[34] Bianhong may have taken the fundamental ideas from Kesariya or Paharpur, then developed and magnified them, so creating the most

complex and powerful Buddhist monument ever constructed.[35]

Moreover, the plan seems to represent in stone a Mahayana Buddhist cosmogram or vision of the universe. Exactly which one is much debated: possibly the Three Realms of Mahayana Buddhism; or the Six (or Ten) Perfections; or it may be a sermon on the Nature of Causation.[36] What is certain is that the sculpted illustrations of texts have been arranged in a carefully designed sequence, gradually leading the pilgrims through increasing levels of abstraction towards a meticulously planned climax as the pilgrim ritually activates the power of the *mandala* and with each higher tier of the monument reaches an ever-higher level of consciousness.

This theory is corroborated by the unusual choice of sculptures which line the galleries of Borobudur. Here can still be seen, almost perfectly intact, four successive tiers of images which are intended to instruct the pilgrims circling its corridors. These range from court dramas in royal palaces to animal fables and morality tales set in ancient jungles. The sculptures wittily observe everyday ninth-century Javanese life: the women of the court and hoary sages performing austerities in the jungle; drummers and dancers and musicians; parrots on the rooftops and monkeys in the treetops; houses raised on stilts and merchants and sailors aboard the outrigged and many-masted lateen-sailed ships of the period. Some of the finest, and indeed strangest, images here occur where the sculptor has attempted to illustrate complex philosophical ideas in stone, such as where the Bodhisattva of Meditation can be seen flying through the air to illustrate his vows that his aspiration to search for the ultimate reality will only end, 'when space itself comes to an end'.[37]

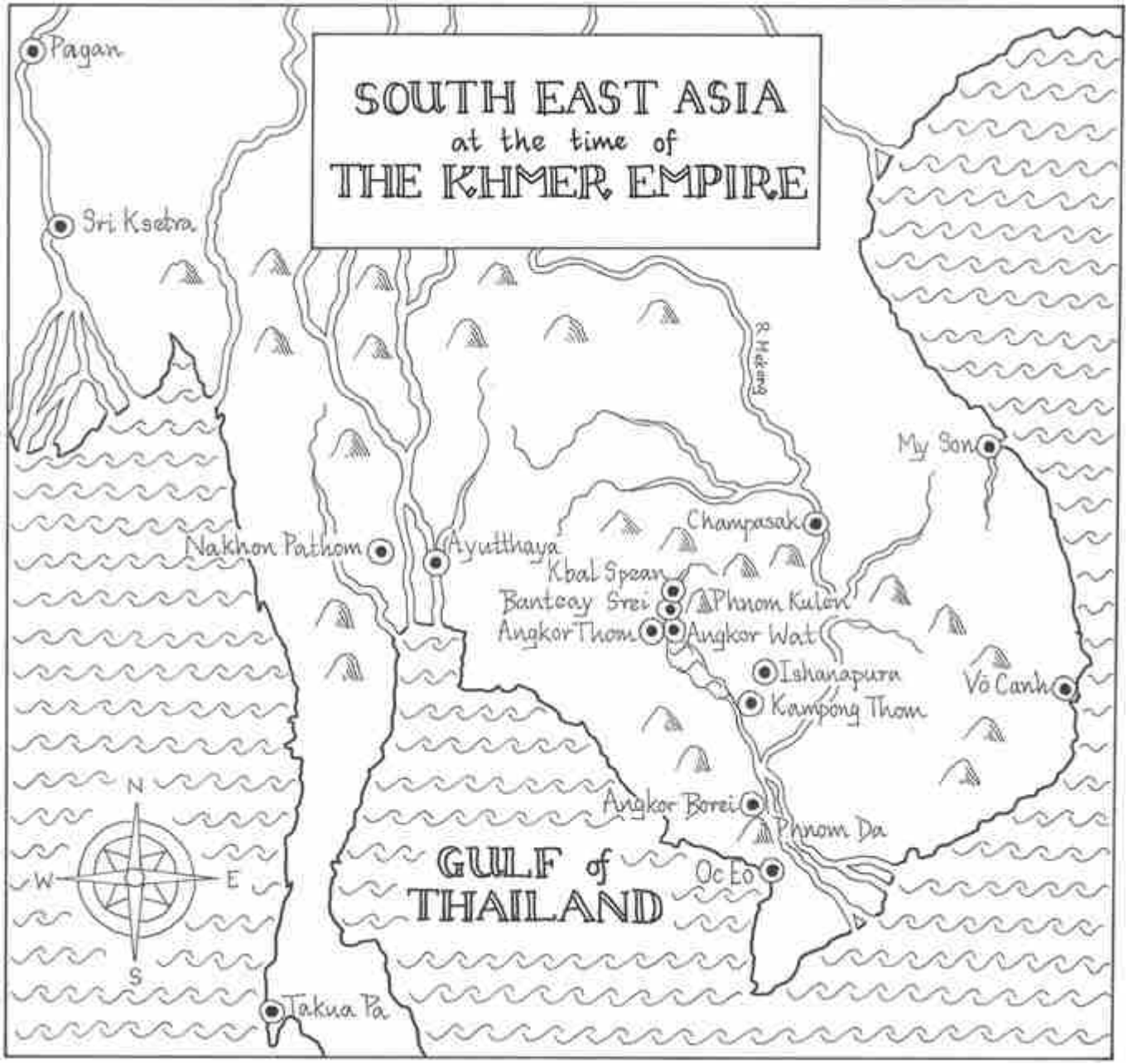
Most of the stories chosen for the galleries of Borobudur are familiar from Buddhist mythology, taking the pilgrims from visions of hell at the base through the *Life of the Buddha* as he struggles to find meaning in this imperfect world. The next level of sculptures shows some of the less familiar Jataka tales. But no fewer than 460 panels, and all those at the higher tiers of the pyramid, are from a much less well-known Indian Buddhist text called the *Gandavyuha*, 'The Structure of the World Compared to a Bubble'.[38] This tells the story of the travels of Sudhana, a pilgrim prince who was inspired to take to the road by the Bodhisattva Manjusri and whose life became a long succession of adventures that read like a Buddhist Odyssey.[39]

In the final scene of the sculptural narration of his story, Sudhana ends his quest by meeting the Bodhisattva and being elevated out of the cycle of rebirth. 'I have attained an enlightened liberation with higher knowledge of arts,' he says, as his illusions drop away and he suddenly understands the true nature of reality. 'I have entered a door of transcendent wisdom called the Sphere of Totality.'[40]

Here, at the apex, the sculpted stories suddenly stop. At this point, the pilgrim emerges from the labyrinthine maze of the *mandala* onto the highest elevated platform, surrounded by seventy-two hollow, latticed and perforated stupikas, and inside each, a void – the goal of the pilgrimage to Enlightenment that the architect has been taking the pilgrim on – and inside that, an image of the meditating Buddha. Only then can he see the view which has up to then been hidden: suddenly the green and fertile paradisical landscape of Java is spread out all around him like a revelation at the end of the pilgrim's journey.

Indian Buddhist literature thus found its most monumental artistic expression far from the shores of India.[41] The vast complex at Borobudur, one of the great cultural achievements of humanity, represents the moment South-east Asian architecture came of age. It not only overshadowed any Buddhist monument previously raised in India; it also inspired the building of a whole remarkable tradition of stepped pyramids in Cambodia.

This process would in time culminate in not only the largest and most magnificent Hindu temple ever built, but the largest religious structure of any sort constructed anywhere in the world: Angkor Wat.


SOUTH EAST ASIA
at the time of
THE KHMER EMPIRE
Pagan
Sri Ksetra
R. Mekong
My Son
Champasak
Nakhon Pathom
Ayutthaya
Kbal Spean
Banteay Srei
Phnom Kulen
Angkor Thom
Angkor Wat
Ishanapura
Võ Canh
Kampong Thom
Angkor Borei
Phnom Da
Oc Eo
GULF of
THAILAND
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‘He Who is Protected by the Sun’

8

In the north-west of Cambodia, beyond the waters of the Great Lake, a line of blue mountains rises abruptly from the rich plains of ripe paddy that stretch up from the banks of the Mekong. At first, these hills climb sharply from the flat plain; then, quite suddenly, they crest into a long, straight sandstone plateau, which seems to float mysteriously above the low clouds of winter cumulus.

These are the heights of Phnom Kulen, the ‘Mountains of Lychees’. For Cambodians these haunting hills are a sacred space, the birthplace not just of the great Empire of Angkor but also of the holy rivers which water its plains and lap around its most holy temples.

Here, in 802, just two years after Charlemagne had declared the birth of the Holy Roman Empire in Italy, another young warrior, the Khmer Prince Jayavarman II, performed a similar ceremony on Phnom Kulen, initiating another world-changing empire. But this one was arguably of even greater consequence than that founded in St Peter’s.[1]

Angkor – from the Sanskrit Nagara, meaning ‘Royal City’ – was an empire that made Charlemagne’s fragile kingdom seem small and provincial. The Khmer kings ruled what was then a far more prosperous and sophisticated part of the globe, controlled a much larger population, lived in bigger cities and left far more substantial monuments: the area within the moat of just one Khmer temple, Angkor Wat, is on its own four times the size of the entire Vatican City. Unlike the brittle polity founded by Charlemagne, and soon lost by his immediate successors, the Khmers of Angkor ruled, for several hundred years, a vast kingdom that by the twelfth century was probably the richest and most powerful state on earth.

Prince Jayavarman had spent his youth as a hostage in Java, where he might possibly have seen the beginning of the building of the great *mandala* stupa of Borobudur.[2] But he was no Buddhist. According to a later inscription, he was a committed Hindu who looked to Lord Shiva as his personal deity. The same inscription tells how he escaped from Java aged around twenty and by 770 ce had returned home to Cambodia from exile. He rejected the Buddhism of his neighbours and enemies, declaring himself independent.[3]

One of his most important decisions was to found a new city named Mahendraparvata on the summit of Phnom Kulen, named after the legendary Hindu holy peak of Mount Mahendra, the 'Monarch among Mountains'.[4] There he performed a magical ceremony, a Hindu version of the sort of Tantric ritual Vajrabodhi had offered to Buddhist monarchs, that 'made it impossible for Java to control holy Cambodia'. He then began a series of military campaigns and forged a web of alliances through marriages and land grants, welding together the disparate regions of South-east Asia into the beginnings of a vast kingdom.[5]

Over a rule of forty-eight years, Jayavarman II conquered all the state henceforth called Kambujadesa or Cambodia. This was marked by the ritual installation of a sacred symbol of state power known as the Devaraja – probably a large, portable lingam but possibly a statue of Shiva – which Jayavarman dedicated to Shiva as Lord of the Mountains. It became at once a national symbol, a state religion and an emblem of sacred protection. At the same time Jayavarman declared himself Lord Shiva's representative on earth and supreme sovereign. The Devaraja subsequently travelled to each successive capital with each successive king of the dynasty.[6]

An inscription survives which gives the borders of Jayavarman II's kingdom as 'China, Champa [modern Vietnam], the ocean, and the land of cardamoms and mangoes [probably eastern Thailand]'. It was the beginning of a campaign of dynastic conquest which would unite much of mainland South-east Asia into a single rich and remarkably urbanised kingdom. This, unusually, looked inland and focused on the carefully managed buildings of dams and the cultivation of huge quantities of rice, rather than to foreign trade, as earlier empires based in the Mekong delta had done.[7] At its peak, the urbanised region of Greater Angkor had a population of well over a million people at a time when London had fewer than 20,000 townsfolk. Yet the place of its founding is now lost in the jungles and the name of its founder is little known outside Cambodia.

Out of the massive sandstone outcrop of Phnom Kulen rises the acquifer of Kbal Spean, which flows down to join the Siem Reap river, which in turn waters Angkor Wat. Khmer inscriptions compare the river to the Ganges itself and it remains especially sacred to Cambodian Buddhists.

One winter morning, while walking close to the source, I came across a lean, barefoot, shaven-headed monk in orange-brown robes. When I first saw him he was lying asleep on a hammock strung between two teak trees; but, hearing me pass, he smiled and swung out of the hammock to greet me.

He pointed into the river. At first I did not understand what he was indicating. Fish? Weeds? Pebbles? It was none of these. On the bed of the stream, at first obscured by the rushing current, lay the unmistakable shape of a stone face. As my eyes focused through the rushing waters, I realised that the face was attached to a body, and to several arms, each holding a weapon. Above the face was a tall, domed headdress, forming a Khmer crown. It was the form of Lord Shiva sculpted out of the rock of the riverbed. Around it the monk pointed out the shapes of several hundred yoni–lingams, the sacred symbols of creative power associated with Shiva and his consort Shakti, arranged in square geometric groups, ten lingams wide, filling the space from bank to bank.

These extraordinary sculptures were, it turned out, an important part of the process of conversion of Cambodia from a variety of animist cults to Puranic Hinduism, a process which had been evolving since the third century ce, but which suddenly accelerated alongside the conquests of Jayavarman II.[8]

Although Buddhist monks and the Hindu trading communities often preceded Hindu Brahmins in their missionary journeys to South-east Asia, and despite a variety of strict prohibitions on sea travel across the Black Water in ancient Hindu texts such as the *Laws of Manu*, the Dharmashastras and some of the Puranas, many Hindus began sailing to the different ports of Suvarnabhumi from the third or fourth century ce. The Dharmashastras must have had limited readership, and the threat of losing caste status would have meant little to the peasant majority that was already at the bottom of the social hierarchy in Brahmanical texts.[9] The injunctions on seafaring in those texts would not have had any real impact on the non-Brahmanical coastal communities from which both the sailors and the merchants were drawn. Nevertheless, a surprisingly large number of Brahmins also started to arrive in the region, and in ever-growing numbers.[10]

Some even claimed to have arrived magically 'by means of yoga'.[11]

Flourishing around this period too is the Khmer origin story which itself seems to be based on a south Indian myth. According to early Chinese sources, the people of Funan believed that their state had been founded by a south Indian Brahmin named Kaundinya. He is said to have arrived with a javelin, or in one version a magical bow given to him by a hero of the *Mahabharata*, Asvatthaman, son of Drona, from whom the Pallava princes in Kanchipuram also claimed descent. A local nymph princess, Mera – from whose name the word Khmer may derive – the daughter of the local *naga* king, paddled out to meet him when his boat first appeared over the horizon. Kaundinya then shot an arrow into her boat, frightening Mera into marrying him. He gave her clothes to wear, and Shiva himself presided over the ceremony.

In exchange Mera's father, Soma, the Dragon King, 'enlarged the possessions of his son-in-law by drinking up the water that covered the country'. In the land thus exposed, he built them a capital and changed the name of the country to Kambuja (Cambodia): 'Kaundinya then changed all the laws to conform to those of India.'[12] Together these two were said to have given birth to the royal Khmer line of Funan. Many of the great Cambodian kings would later trace their ancestry to this mythical couple, who represented, among other things, a marriage between the sun and the moon, nature and civilisation, India and Cambodia.[13]

Behind this imported mythology lay a verifiable historical truth: from around the fourth and fifth centuries ce, the nascent city states across the breadth of monsoon Asia all began to look to Indian political and religious models, and started to adopt, to different extents, many of the ideas of statecraft brought by the Indian Brahmins who were docking in increasing numbers at their ports.

Hindu concepts of divinely sanctioned kingship proved especially useful to local chieftains keen to expand their territory and enhance their dignity and authority. It also gave them a gloss of cosmopolitan glamour as well as a useful heavenly sanction for their rule. This arrangement suited the Brahmins too, who were in a good position to enrich themselves by making themselves useful at the courts of these kings: they had experience, after all, of running similar kingdoms, giving counsel and administering the same rituals at courts the other side of the Bay of Bengal.[14]

The first evidence that Indian Brahmins were beginning to join the traders on their voyages to the Lands of Gold comes from Chinese sources. A Chinese text of 400 ce talks about a thousand Indian Brahmins living at the small coastal court of Tun-sun on the Malay peninsula: 'the people practice their doctrine and give them their daughters in marriage. In consequence, many of these Brahmins do not go away.'[15]

A slightly later Chinese diplomatic text describes the King of Kedah in Malaysia sitting in front of a golden crouching bull, presumably a representation of Lord Shiva's mount, Nandi. 'In front of the bull, a single bejewelled parasol; and to the left and right of the parasol, bejewelled fans. Hundreds of Brahmins were seated in rows facing each other on the left and right.' These Brahmins, the account continues, were given 'special reverence'. Many of the most celebrated Khmer kings chose as their queens the daughters of Brahmins newly arrived 'from the land where Krishna sported by the Yamuna' and who came 'from that excellent land … to purify that of the Khmers'.[16]

It was an extraordinary moment for the Chinese envoys. Only in northern Vietnam, Korea and Japan had any of the peoples of East Asia adopted the ways, manners, architectural forms and scripts of the Chinese Middle Kingdom. Yet here in kingdoms many thousands of miles from India the peoples of South-east Asia seemed by some mysterious alchemy of attraction to be being drawn into an ever-widening Indosphere where ideas and forms and stories first dreamed up in South Asia were being discussed, appreciated, adopted and adapted very far from home.

Several sculptures have survived of these early Brahmanical courts, including an image of a royal consecration carved on an early Khmer lintel from Kampong Thom in central Cambodia. Here the king sits in an open pavilion with long lines of bearded Brahmins stretching out on either side of him. Their hair is piled up in dreadlocked beehives, they wear long pendant earrings and they are naked but for a neatly wrapped sampot around their waist and a Brahmin's chord slung over the shoulder. Two Brahmins adjacent to the King pour holy water over him in the act of lustration or consecration.[17] Over the years which followed, the Brahmins began encouraging rulers to swear devotion to the Hindu gods. They also began to weave themselves into local power structures through intermarriage.[18]

It is not known if these learned Brahmins came at the invitation of the chieftains of South-east Asia or on their own initiative. But they brought with them their epics and literature, their mythologies and their theologies, as well as new spiritual and yogic methods. They also brought the Shilpa Shastras, which set out Hindu ideas on what was proper and appropriate in sculpture and in architecture; they may also have

brought the *Natyashastra*, which did the same for the performing arts, music, dance and theatre.

Then there was their learning in astrology and astronomy, the Shaka calendar system in use in India, scientific texts, experience in administration and statecraft, and Indian methods of counting and higher mathematics. It is on an inscription from Cambodia that a dot representing the world's oldest surviving dateable zero was recently found. It pre-dates the oldest such inscription to survive in India – where these ideas first developed – within the fort of Gwalior, by 200 years. (In the Gwalior example, for the first time, a hole appears within the dot to give the 0 symbol we still use today.)[19]

The chiefs and kings of South-east Asia found a striking way to express their connection both to the great Hindu deities and to their royal counterparts in India. By the fifth century, if not before, almost all had begun taking the names of Hindu gods. These tend to end with the same -varman suffix, meaning 'under the protection of', such as Rudravarman, 'Protected by Rudra', or Jayavarman, 'Protected by Victory'. These were names ordained by the Hindu *Laws of Manu* for the Kshatriya warrior caste, from which Hindu kings of India were drawn, and was the preferred nomenclature followed in several parts of India, particularly among the Pallavas of the South.[20]

There is also evidence that the courts of South-east Asia began to take on other more intimate and personal Hindu habits: since the second century ce they had begun cremating their dead, for example, and now began avoiding the left hand in eating. They also began cleaning their teeth with toothsticks of neem wood.[21]

Some aspects of Indian civilisation made almost no impression on South-east Asia. The caste hierarchy, for example, never crystallised in the region in the way it did in India, and ideas of ritual impurity and elaborate bans on eating with members of different castes completely failed to take root. Most South-east Asians also rejected vegetarianism and retained a particular fondness for pork.

On the walls of the Bayon Temple in Angkor Thom there is a sculpture of a kitchen in which the cooks are about to drop a whole suckling pig head first into a bubbling cauldron as a cook blows on the kindling to fan the flames. There are also images of men fishing with nets. Chinese sources add that the Khmers reared chicken, ducks, sheep and geese for slaughter and that their diet included idli-like rice cakes soaked in meat gravy. All this would have horrified some of their royal counterparts in India, many of whom (though not all) followed the *Laws of Manu* which strictly insisted on the avoidance of fish and sternly forbade the eating of either pigs or hens, on pain of losing caste.[22] In contrast, one Khmer inscription mentions a feast that required 'two thousand bowls, two pigs, eight hundred large fish, meat gravy and a quantity of beer'.[23]

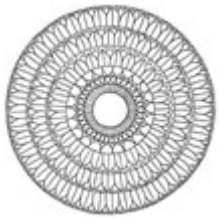
There was one other aspect of South-east Asian life that remained untouched by Indian influence: the high status of women. In Cambodia women remained owners and disposers of property, something from which the *Laws of Manu* and wider Indian Brahmanical tradition excluded them. There are even references to women priests officiating at Cambodian temples, and evidence that these roles passed by matrilineal descent. This was something Jayavarman II insisted upon even in the lineage of his imperial Brahmins who performed the royal inaugurations.[24]

Given all these breaks with Brahminical tradition, it is important to remember that while the Brahmins were certainly the most visible Indian immigrants to South-east Asia, and left the most solid epigraphic evidence of their presence, many other non-literate Indian caste groups were also present and may have been predominant. Recent DNA evidence from the first to the third centuries ce found in bones at Angkor Borei offers alternative ways of imagining the early Indian immigrant population and the whole process of knowledge transmission that they brought about.

The archaeologists who made the study noted that 'Southern Indian ancestry was estimated at 42–49%' for the Cambodian individual whose remains they were studying. They identified 'Irula, Mala, and Vellalar' caste types as the most likely South Asian contributors to the ancient individual's genome. These are all specifically low-caste non-Brahmin groups. It appears that we are dealing with the emigration of a large and

socially varied group of Indian individuals, leading to intermarriage with Cambodians and the emergence of mixed-marriage families.

This implies a varied mercantile diaspora rather than just the boatloads of literate Brahmins who record their own presence on inscriptions. It also helps explain the presence of non-Vedic, non-Brahmanical Tamil folk and village guardian deities like Aiyanar turning up from the beginning in shrines across the region, where he seems to have been worshipped as the Protector of Travellers and the Night Guardian of Reservoirs.[25]



Whatever their DNA contribution to the region, the Brahmins did bring with them from India three crucial gifts that proved irresistible right across the region: Sanskrit, the art of writing and the stories of the great Indian epics.

No Indian import had a deeper or more long-lasting impact than the deeds of the heroes of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. From the fifth century, right on through to the dance and shadow puppetry of the present day, these would remain a major feature in the art and culture of South-east Asia.[26] In time, even the landscape of South-east Asia began to be renamed under the influence of the great epics and the stories of their respective heroes, the Pandava brothers and Lord Rama.

The earliest inscription in Khmer territories dating from the fifth century records that a ruler in what is now Laos took the Indic name Devanika and the grandiose Sanskrit title Maharajadhiraja, 'King of Kings'. This happened during a ceremony when the King installed an image of Shiva under the lingam-shaped mountain that towered over his capital of Champasak. There he consecrated a tank which he named Kurukshetra, after the plain to the north of Delhi where the great battle of the *Mahabharata* was fought.[27]

It was not just that new Indian religions had been welcomed into the region: even the landscape itself was being reimagined. The holy rivers of India, the apocalyptic battlefield of the *Mahabharata* and the great capitals of the *Ramayana* were now being imaginatively built anew many thousands of miles to the east of India, in the paddy fields of the Mekong and amid the volcanoes of Java. Just as William Blake might many centuries later dream of building a metaphorical Jerusalem anew in England's green and pleasant land, so this early Khmer King was dreaming of creating in his tropical mountains an eastward extension of the holy land of India. As the inscription read,

> All [the Maharajah's] deeds are infused with the good and beneficent grace acquired through his former births, and they transcend the human. He is like Yudhishthira [the leader of the Pandava brothers] in his dedication to the *dharma* of the good; like the king of the Gods [Indra] in protecting his subjects; like Arjuna in conquering his foes … like the ocean in profundity, like Mount Meru in constancy … May the celestial fruit proclaimed formerly in Kurukshetra … find itself here in the new Kurukshetra.[28]

Before the arrival of the highly literate Brahmins there appears to have been no indigenous writing system in South-east Asia. To fill this absence, Sanskrit – 'the Language of the Gods in the World of Men' – became the language of government, literacy and ritual throughout the region.[29] The inscriptions carved in this newly imported sacred language are broadly datable thanks to the Indian scripts they employ.[30]

The oldest was probably carved around 250 ce on the eight-foot-high stone stele of Vo Canh, on the coast of Vietnam. The Chams of that area seem to have been in close contact with traders from the region around Amaravati in Andhra Pradesh: the writing on the stele is similar to the Andhra form of the southern Brahmi script. The use of certain Sanskrit terms hints that the text of the *Ramayana* had already spread to this coast and had acted as an exemplar for the ideals of kingship celebrated in the stele.[31]

The stone mentions a king who had the Indian, possibly Tamil, name of Raja Sri Mara and refers to the very Indian concept of 'compassion for all creatures'. Yet the text is about the tribute of white elephants offered by the King to the Chinese court. So although Raja Sri Mara was clearly within the Chinese political

orbit, by 250 ce an Indian language, script and royal titles had become enough of a lingua franca on the coast of the South China Sea to be used to record a major political gesture.[32] By 400 ce, another Cham chieftain, Bhadravarman I, was describing himself in an inscription in the early Saiva holy site of My Son as 'Dharma Maharaja', effectively the 'Just Ruler'. The same temple preserves the earliest image of the Dancing Shiva in the region (though only just: the temple ruins were phosphorus-bombed by American jets during the 1960s Vietnam War and many other fine sculptures were destroyed).[33]

These two inscriptions are important as they represent the crucial moment the rulers of the region embraced the Pallava-style Brahmi letters of south India.[34] These letters in time became the basis for almost every pre-Islamic script in South-east Asia: Khmer, Javanese, Kawi, Lontara, Lao, Thai, Cham and Malay. Along with the scripts and the language came the same poetic conventions, the same taste for elaborate puns and the same allusions to the same seminal Sanskrit texts that then guided Indian courtly life. Remarkably the inscriptions reveal, from the beginning, complete mastery of Indian philosophical and religious doctrines.[35]

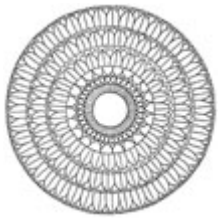
Another inscription was carved in the southern Brahmi script around 400 ce, and erected in the Kutei region of Borneo, a major source of gold for Indian merchants. Here a king with the Sanskrit name of Raja Rajendra Mulavarman is eulogised in an inscription carved on seven sacrificial Vedic *yupa* posts.[36] The inscription again invokes the *Mahabharata*, and compares Mulavarman, 'the Lord of Kings … the king of illustrious and resplendent fame', to 'the hero Yudhishthira' who also made 'a fire sacrifice'. It tells how, like his father Ashvavarman, 'the founder of a noble race', and his grandfather Kadungga, 'the Lord of Men', he defeated his enemies and made them pay tax. He also boasts of having brought many Brahmins from India into his kingdom and given them 'a wish-granting tree and a gift of land'. It is they who have erected the *yupa* 'to commemorate these many pious acts'.

The text is written in excellent Sanskrit in the southern Brahmi script, but the actual details of the sacrifice sound most improbable. Mulavarman's claims of having presented his court Brahmins with as many as 90,000 cattle, in a jungle island with no history of cattle herding, does stretch all credibility, indicating that the list of gifts was probably more symbolic than real, echoing similar formulations and scribal conventions in India, rather than a literal description of an actual sacrifice. But it still bears witness to the practice of some sort of Vedic rites, the assumption of the trappings of Hindu kingship and the presence of a group of courtly Brahmins in a distant mining port in upriver, fourth-century Borneo. This would be a place where presumably few people other than the Brahmins could read the inscriptions anyway.[37]

Mulavarman's inscription contains a crucial piece of information about the family who erected the stele. Although the King has a south Indian-sounding Sanskrit name, his grandfather, the chief credited with founding the dynasty, is clearly indigenous Javanese: he is called Kadungga, implying that the same family dynasty continued to rule while changing their names and court language. The transformation, in other words, came not with the sword or conquest but peacefully, possibly with intermarriage, as local chieftains took on the Brahmins' new religion and, with it, new Hindu names, titles and rituals. The adoption of Indian practices, in other words, came voluntarily over generations, with conversion and influence, and not by conquest and military subjection, as earlier Indian historians once believed.[38]

Around 500 ce, the oldest inscription in Java was carved on a massive riverside boulder near modern Jakarta.[39] Using the most up-to-date Indian calendrical system, it eulogises the Lord of Taruma (*tarumam* is Tamil for *dharma*), Raja Purnavarman, whose 'armour cannot be penetrated by the arrows of his enemies'. In fluent Sanskrit, and with startling bravado, Purnavarman portrays himself not just as a devotee of Vishnu, but as someone who sees himself almost as an incarnation of that god, calling himself 'Purnavarman, the Great King, Ruler of the World, whose footprints are the same as those of Lord Vishnu'. To emphasise the claim, a pair of footprints are carved alongside the inscription, symbolic of the Divine Presence. Sanskrit, it is clear, was not just the language of Hindu ritual; it was also an elite political language that came with a ready-made ideology of kingly power which by associating their rule with the divine bolstered the standing and authority of the chiefs and tribal leaders who adopted its tenets.[40]

This inscription reflects the latest trends in *bhakti* devotional worship, the same religious spirit that would be evoked by Mahendravarman Pallava in Tamil Nadu a century later and it shows the speed with which new Indic ideas were now passing eastwards across the seas, with Java in this case possibly even pre-empting developments in Tamil country.



By the close of the eighth century, the entire landscape of South-east Asia was dotted with newly built Hindu and Buddhist temples and shrines to the imported gods and religions of South Asia. But amid much Indian influence distinct local architectural forms continued to develop. This was a process that would spin off in its own fantastic trajectory in the centuries to come as Hindu and Buddhist architecture in the region followed an increasingly independent theological and aesthetic course, quite different from the temples and sculpture in India itself. Just as many of the most celebrated monuments of Hellenistic civilisation exist outside the modern boundaries of Greece, so in Java, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand and Myanmar were erected some of the greatest monuments to Indic literature and religion. And just as the terminus of Indian trade routes lay outside India, so here were produced extraordinary works of art inspired by its philosophies, ideas and stories.

The most remarkable of these in Java were the 240 shrines and temples of Prambanan, built around the end of the eighth century. Prambanan is the royal temple complex of the Sanjaya Dynasty of Mataram and is situated immediately beneath the acropolis of their palace on the outskirts of modern Yogyakarta.[41] The soaring 155-foot-high *shikhara* spires of these massive, richly carved and ornate cathedral-like temples date astonishingly from only a century after the first austere and tentative Hindu temples were erected amid the volcanoes and geysers of the Dieng plateau.

At the centre of the complex lies the temple of Loro Jonggrang, which contains some of the earliest and arguably the greatest sets of reliefs of the *Ramayana* ever sculpted. Conveying all the pathos and passion, heartbreak and heroism of the text, the hundred-odd Loro Jonggrang reliefs at Prambanan are a far more complete representation of the *Ramayana* than any surviving cycle in stone in India: here the whole of this fabulous tale of exile, struggle, loss, battle and redemption is unfolded before us in encyclopaedic detail. Nothing like this had yet been sculpted in India. In fact, it pre-dates any surviving Indian *Ramayana* sculptural cycles by centuries.[42]

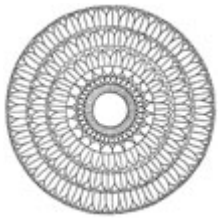
The sequence follows the life of its hero, Prince Rama, whose magical powers and divine destiny were first revealed when he broke the bow of Shiva and won the hand of the beautiful Princess Sita. Disaster ensues when, thanks to the plotting of a wicked stepmother, the couple are exiled to the forest along with Rama's faithful brother Lakshman, and Sita is then abducted by the ten-headed, twenty-armed demon Ravana. The story follows Rama's quest to rescue his beloved from the clutches of Ravana with the help of an army of monkeys led by the simian god Hanuman and the monkey king Sugriva, who commands one search party to look for Sita eastwards even 'to Yavadvipa [Java], splendid with its seven kingdoms embellished with gold mines'.

The story reaches its climax with a full-scale assault on Ravana's island fortress of Lanka by the forces of Rama and Hanuman, after which the separated couple are reunited and return in triumph to their capital of Ayodhya, so initiating the Golden Age of Ram Rajya – though, tragically, through malicious gossip, Sita is again exiled into the forest to give birth in the hermitage of the epic's author, Valmiki.[43]

Here at Loro Jonggrang can be found gorgeous images of the heroic Lord Ram, the perfect man and the perfect ruler, standing with balletic poise and grace as he aims his longbow at the golden deer and a variety of snarling, befanged moustachioed monsters and horror demons with their wild manes of unkempt hair and grimacing faces in their bellies. A whole world is spread out in panel after panel: groups of meditating sages and wizened, bearded ascetics sit cross-legged on the ghats of a sacred river performing their austerities with their hair woven into beehive topknots and dreadlocks; a sorrowing king dies racked with grief; sensuous court ladies lounge in their palaces or sit gossiping in their quarters; boatmen row villagers over rivers swollen in full monsoon spate; dancers dance, drummers drum and lovers love. Especially effective are the scenes depicting the advance of the confederacy of Hanuman's army on Lanka as the monkeys move forward in great waves, like a succession of breakers on an island beach.

There is nothing provincial about this art, and it is no distant echo of an Indian original, although it was almost certainly the work of local Mataram artists and was based on a new version of the *Ramayana*

recently composed in old Javanese, indeed the first known work written in that tongue.[44] The *Ramayana* reliefs of Prambanan show an Indic aesthetic at the very peak of its post-Gupta classicism, elegance and perfection. It is an extraordinary testament not just to the skill of the sculptors of Sanjaya Java but also to the continuously evolving and renegotiated nature of Indian influence in this region, as well as to the power of Valmiki's epic and its ability to charm, excite, move and inspire great artists many thousands of miles from the land of its birth.[45]



Some time in the sixth century CE, a wayward group of Shaiva ascetics, known as the Pashupatas, arrived in Cambodia from India. They spearheaded a new wave of Shaivism which under their charismatic influence gradually became the dominant faith in the region.[46]

The Pashupatas were heterodox, wandering, ascetic Brahmins who smeared their bodies with a 'white radiance' of ash. They bathed themselves in ashes three times a day and even slept on a bed of ashes. They seem to have originated in caves on the banks of the Narmada river in central India and are briefly mentioned in the *Mahabharata* and the *Natyashastra*.[47] They were spotted by Xuanzang glowing ghostly ash-white, wandering as far north as Khotan and Afghanistan. They also appear, behaving badly, in Dandin's novel *Dasakumaracharita* and in Mahendravarman Pallava's play *The Farce of the Drunkards' Games*.[48]

These *bhakti*-intoxicated holy men were renowned for turning their back on the conventions of society and for acting as outcastes and even madmen. They wore rags, skins and grass skirts, hung themselves with used garlands and carried skull-topped staffs or spiked clubs. They behaved like agitated dogs or wild animals, 'bellowing like bulls', ignoring 'boundaries of purity and impurity, vice and virtue'.[49] Through their renunciation, austerities and visions they believed they could slip through the veil separating this world from that beyond and become one with Lord Shiva at death.[50] They preached a particularly intense devotion to Lord Shiva as Lord of the Cattle (*Pasu*) and Supreme Yogi, the First of Ascetics.[51] They worshipped their lord with singing, dancing, hysterical laughter and the reciting of secret mantras. They offered themselves as the ultimate form of cosmic protection for kings.[52]

On arrival in Cambodia in some force in the sixth century, the Pashupatas made a dramatic impression on their hosts. They probably initially entered the court as poets, singers, musicians, flute players, bone rattlers and dance masters as much as ascetics and theologians. But soon others among them came to power as advisers, teachers, Sanskrit grammarians, ritual specialists and, most dramatic of all, Tantric sorcerers and magicians to the Khmer kings claiming the power to procure invincible success in battle for their patrons.[53]

Courtly Indian Brahmins had now been coming to the region for centuries, offering to empower local kings with ritual consecration and astrological predictions, as well as displaying more terrestrial skills such as literacy and higher numeracy. But the Pashupatas promised more: like Hindu counterparts of the great Tantric Buddhist masters, they claimed to have secret spiritual knowledge and yogic powers ranging from concentration and 'unshakable self-control as a result of austerities' to outright magical powers – to shrink or enlarge their bodies, to fly, to hear conversations held far away.[54]

By the seventh century, the cult of Lord Shiva was beginning to dominate the religious life of the region. At court, the doctrines of the Pashupatas were showing up in royal inscriptions: Shiva is now referred to as 'omniscient' and 'accessible to sages through meditation focused exclusively on Him'. One ascetic is described as 'ablaze with Shiva's *shakti* [spiritual power]'.[55]

In 615, the same year that sculptors in distant Afghanistan began work on the second Bamiyan Buddha, in the central Cambodian kingdom of Chenla a Khmer monarch began work on a new capital called Ishanapura, the 'City of Shiva'.[56] Today it is wildly, magnificently, hopelessly overgrown, a Sleeping Beauty of a temple complex, tangled in a thick lattice of aerial roots and creepers. Most of the brick temples then constructed are now returning to the forests that surround them, with banyan roots, strangler figs and lianas eating them up like spiders embalming living, captive insects. Snake-like tendrils of pepper vines finger their way through window frames and up door jambs. Cracked lintels covered in mosses and bright lichens are supported by the roots of thousand-year-old banyan trees, which wrap their way over broken

arcades, coiling in spirals, gripping fallen finials and crumbling friezes of bare-breasted dancing girls in girdles and anklets, spear-holding warriors in *Mahabharata* war chariots and cross-legged Shaiva ascetics lost deep in meditation.

In its day this Shaiva complex was by far the largest city in the region. The temples were entrusted to the Pashupatas and the King may even have become a Pashupata initiate himself: he is described as seizing power through the power generated by his *tapasiya* (penance) and 'his personal *shakti*'.[57]

The Pashupatas would also be of central importance to King Jayavarman II after his return from Java in 790. To obtain victory over his enemies, Jayavarman II was offered 'a magical siddhi [tantric spell] which no other had obtained', from a Shaiva holy man named Hiranyadama, 'a scientist in magic science'.[58] After this, Jayavarman was described 'as an incarnate portion of the god, who is Shiva', the beginning of a cult of the God King, or Devaraja, that soon became the pre-eminent royal Hindu cult in Cambodia and on which Khmer kingship came to rest.[59] At the same time their ideas were beginning to melt into those of pre-existing pre-Hindu cults of earth gods and territorial spirits across the land. The Pashupatas shared with these a tradition of spirit drumming and death dancing, so that the frenzied *damaru* drums of the Shaivas could blend effortlessly with the ancient bronze kettledrums of the region, summoning the dead to rebirth and new life.[60]

As one twelfth-century Cambodian inscription from this period put it:

> The dance of the God who has the moon for his diadem [Lord Shiva], the play of whose glorious feet cause the earth to shake and tremble in the eight directions, a dance which causes Indra, God of the Winds, to whirl and moan and which causes the palaces of the Gods to sway, a dance which renders space insignificant with shooting rays from the splendour of his nine modes of dance [erotic, furious, heroic, odious, comic, pathetic, marvellous, terrible and peaceful].[61]

This was a god the people of the region would have absolutely no trouble understanding and appreciating.

By associating himself with Shiva, the Lord of the Mountains, and founding his new capital on Mount Mahendra, sacred to the spirits of the ancestors, Jayavarman II blended indigenous deities and ancestor cults with Indic religious forms and made himself the supreme intermediary able to channel the supernatural realm to his subjects.[62] There was also a strong sense in which the Devaraja, the sacred symbol of the God King, was understood as both state Shiva lingam and supreme Cambodian fertility spirit, the protective *anak ta*.[63] Before Jayavarman, the Khmer elite, both courtiers and priests, saw themselves living in a Hindu universe, while the mass of peasant farmers still propitiated an earlier spirit world of deceased ancestors, village deities and the spirit guardians of trees and rivers and fields. Now, more than ever, with the aid of the Pashupatas, Shaivas and other devotees of Shiva, those two supernatural worlds began to merge.[64]

In Jayavarman's service, the Pashupatas performed rituals, many involving music, drumming, dancing and drama. They also oversaw the carving of the sculptures in rivers, on temples and on mountain tops which extended the Hindu holy land from India 'between the two oceans' to the now sacralised land of Cambodia beyond. Thus they turned Jayavarman's realm into what they believed to be a holy Hindu landscape, full of spiritual crossing places and the marks of Shiva's divinity – artificial lakes consecrated in his name, lingams matching those in his holy land and above all temple pyramids modelled on his mountain home, and often named after venerable Shaiva sites of pilgrimage in India.[65]

The first of these, the ziggurat-like sanctuary built by Jayavarman for his consecration, was built by the young prince on the sacred hilltop of Phnom Kulen. Surprisingly for a place of such importance in the history of Cambodia, it now lies abandoned in a jungle still dotted with Khmer Rouge landmines. There is not even a road leading to it. To get there I had to hitch a lift on the back of a scooter.

Riding pillion, I bumped along a dry watercourse, through miles of cashew orchards and pepper vines, and eventually found the first of the great Khmer step pyramids standing forgotten in the middle of nowhere, ten miles from the nearest tarmac road. In the topmost layer, abandoned in the scrub jungle, stood the yoni plinth on top of which the original Devaraja had once presumably rested, all that remained of the sacred space where the Empire of Angkor was founded.

The magical rites that the high priest Hiranyadama performed on the pyramid in 802 were believed to have nullified all previous vows of loyalty to Java and proclaimed Jayavarman the universal monarch and 'world emperor'. The Devaraja cult was based on this mountain top at the centre of the now lost royal

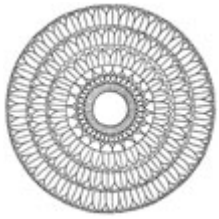
capital, site of the realm's principal temple, whose enormous extent, hidden and invisible beneath the encroaching jungle, has only recently been revealed by the new ground-scanning technology of lidar.[66] Here was established the state cult that celebrated the unity of the Khmer people under the protection of Lord Shiva, while incorporating the worship of pre-Hindu local deities, spirits, river gods, godlings and deified ancestors.[67]

So began a trajectory of conquest, irrigation works and building of step pyramids and temples that would be followed by Khmer rulers for the next 400 years.[68] Towards the end of his reign, Jayavarman II went on to construct a second Khmer capital on the plains of Angkor at Hariharalaya near modern Siem Reap. Here, on the edge of the Great Lake, he built the first of the large-scale dams and reservoirs that would in time allow the Khmers to control water on an unprecedented scale, overcoming erratic rainfall and so turning Angkor into one of the great hydraulic civilisations of history.[69]

The Khmers were consummate agricultural engineers, who according to the reports of a Chinese ambassador managed to control irrigation so brilliantly that they could harvest up to four rice crops a year, which they ate along with the abundant fish of the Great Lake. By doubling rice production, and bringing more than fifty million flooded fields into harvest using a combination of floating rice and other techniques, the royal reservoirs made it possible to feed hundreds of thousands of additional people. It was these agricultural surpluses that underwrote the prosperous economy.[70] Before long, for roughly 400 square miles between the Great Lake and the Kulen hills, a dense network of villages, fields, roads, canals, bridges, reservoirs and embankments crisscrossed the landscape, carefully regulating the monsoon floodwaters and so enabling optimum conditions for wet-rice agriculture.[71]

This rapidly expanding population and economy facilitated a quantum increase in the scale of construction.[72] This in turn led to the creation of what was then quite possibly the most extensive and densely populated urban space in the world, with a massive population in the imperial core which at its peak may have exceeded 1.5 million people, many of whom were drafted in as corvée construction labour between harvests.[73]

Jayavarman left one other legacy. At his death in 850, he became the first example of a deified Khmer king, and he was known posthumously by the divine Shaiva title 'Parameshvara'. This was the beginning of an identification between the dead kings of Cambodia and Lord Shiva that would become a unique and increasingly important feature of Cambodian Shaivism.[74]



In 967, amid all this growing Khmer power and prosperity, Yajnavaraha, the urbane and highly educated Prime Minister of the then King of Angkor began work on a tiny, exquisitely ornate and supremely delicate temple in pink sandstone known as 'the jewel of Khmer art'.

Unlike most Khmer foundations, Banteay Srei was not a royal endeavour. Instead, it was planned and patronised personally by Yajnavaraha who, as well as a trusted adviser to the King and tutor to the Crown Prince, was a prominent Shaiva devotee and a Sanskrit scholar of great erudition, taste and knowledge. This was intended as his private chapel.[75]

There are magnificent sculptures of youthful guardian figures with pendant earrings and dancers' anklets, as well as lovely young goddesses, especially the supple Durga dancing her way to victory over the buffalo god 'with a sinuous pattern of limbs rounded by the sap of youth', as Stella Kramrisch nicely put it.

But it is not just the exquisite beauty of the sculpture that is fascinating. It seems to have been planned by Yajnavaraha himself, in part as a literary game, in part as a demonstration of his erudition. Either way, it reveals a great deal about the Sanskrit texts that were being read in tenth-century Cambodia. Banteay Srei also shows how such literary and sacred texts were passed on and where they were kept: the temple has two gorgeous pavilions tentatively identified as Yajnavaraha's personal libraries.

Whether the identification is correct or not, Yajnavaraha's libraries appear to have been remarkably well stocked. Almost every class of Indian literature is referenced in the sculpture that decorates the temple. The great epics, of course, are present, but here we see a more idiosyncratic and erudite selection of scenes than

normal: many-armed Ravana desperately shaking Mount Kailasha to attract the attention of Lord Shiva, who, hardly bothered, steadies it with a touch of his foot; the terrible phosphorus-like fire unleashed to burn down the Khandava forest; Krishna killing his villainous uncle Kamsa; and Bhima leaping through the air, sword raised, to strike the scheming warrior Duryodhana, the leader of the Kaurava clan, who braces to meet the blow.[76]

Some of the panels show a knowledge of the poems and plays of Kalidasa, 'the Sanskrit Shakespeare', such as that which depicts Lord Shiva taking the disguise of a Brahmin to tempt and test his wife Parvati. The faithful goddess, immune to the flirtatious Brahmin's blandishments, immediately stops up her ears with her fingers; when Shiva finally reveals himself, Parvati worships her Lord. Other panels show scenes from the different Puranas, illustrated with images of, for example, Kama, the God of Love, firing arrows amid the branches of a mango orchard at an enthroned Lord Shiva, while nearby the fearsome Yama, God of Death and Lord of Hell, ambles past on his buffalo. In panel after panel are novel illustrations of unexpected scenes carefully selected from the great canon of Sanskrit poetry, the shastras and the *Raghuvamsha*. There is no better illustration of the literary and cultural spread of the Indosphere taking root and flourishing many thousands of miles to the east of India.[77]

Most remarkable of all, an inscription at the entrance to the temple talks of the Sanskrit literary education Yajnavaraha gave his younger brother: 'Of this Yajñavarāha, who had seen the further shore of [the ocean of] knowledge, his younger brother was called Viṣṇukumāra,' it begins.

> The waterlily of his mouth opened wide, drinking in again and again the nectareous moonlight of knowledge that came forth from his guru's mouth. He received all the disciplines, beginning with that of grammar, from his elder brother [as well as] all the arts and the forms of yoga taught by Śiva, and by the Guru [Patañjali, the father of Sanskrit grammar who was also a major mystic and philosopher]. So that there should be no interruption in the transmission of knowledge, he wrote out the whole *Kāśikāvṛtti* [one of the key texts on the complexities of Sanskrit grammar] and the *Śiva Saṃhitā* [an important Shaiva yoga text describing yogic positions and the magical powers they can generate]. Inspired by this reading, he composed verses, learned a variety of languages and scripts, and acted in many dramas.[78]

Very rarely do such curriculums get written down at this period; to find such great Sanskrit erudition such a long way from India is astonishing. Far from being on the periphery of the Indic literary world, Cambodia seems to have been a remarkably sophisticated centre of poetry, theatre and epigraphy, and one of the principal centres of the assiduous study and deployment of perfect Sanskrit grammar at a time when that sacred language was the universal medium of learning all the way from the mountains of Afghanistan to the distant shores of Bali. Moreover, the Khmers seem to have been unusually nerdy and bookish in their tastes: there are far more mentions of libraries, scripts, orthography, recitation of texts and manuscript production in the relatively small corpus of Cambodian inscriptions than is to be found in the much larger body of texts surviving from India at the same period.[79] The same seems to have been true of their neighbours, the Chams of what is now Vietnam. When a Chinese army plundered the Cham capital in 605 CE, they took away with them 1,350 volumes of Buddhist scripture that they found in the libraries there.[80]

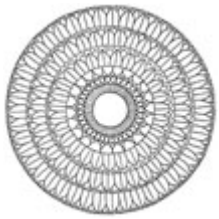
More surprising still is a panel at the temple which indicates an awareness of a little-known fifth-century female Tamil Nayanar poet, Karaikkal Ammaiyar, who is said to have renounced her great beauty and turned herself into an emaciated ascetic to follow Lord Shiva and become one of the greatest of devotional poets. While much loved in Tamil lands, Karaikkal Ammaiyar does not seem to be well known even in neighbouring Andhra; yet here she is, sculpted in stone, fanged and shrivelled, sitting at Shiva's dancing feet in the distant Khmer Empire. Indeed, this may be the oldest representation of her.[81]

This is not the only surviving clue that the Khmers were in close intellectual touch with the kings and scholars of southern India. Indravarman I's chief Brahmin, Sivasoma, claimed to have studied under 'Shankara, the nectar of whose lotus feet is lapped by the bee-like tongues of all scholars', possibly a reference to the great eighth-century south Indian Hindu revivalist, Adi Shankara. This would seem to indicate that Khmer scholars were travelling to study Hindu scriptures and Indic philosophy in India itself.[82]

Equally, one of the rarer figures who appears in the sculpture is Vali, the brother of the monkey king Sugriva, and one of the heroes of the *Ramayana*. At Banteay Srei he appears fighting with his brother, in an image familiar from illustrations of the epic. What is more surprising is to find him popping up no fewer

than three times around Angkor in the much more unexpected context of the story of the Churning of the Ocean of Milk in search of the Elixir of Immortality. The presence of Vali in this scene is very rare, found only in the Chalukya temples of Pattadakal, just to the north of the Pallava border.[83]

This and other specifically southern Indian influences raise the question of how far the Cambodian links with south India went. Did they extend beyond the transmission of language and culture into politics? There are some hints they may well have done, and from an early date.



In 731 ce, there was a succession dispute in Pallava Kanchipuram. The Pallava King, Parameswaravarman II, had died unexpectedly and without a direct heir. He had been on the throne for less than three years and he may have been the victim of a sudden attack by the Pallavas' mortal enemies, the rival Chalukyas of Badami. An assembly of leading scholars and noblemen debated the matter and decided to reach out to a collateral branch of the dynasty that had made their home far away in a distant kingdom. Five generations earlier, a young prince called Bhima had left Kanchipuram to make his fortune overseas. There he was said to have married a local princess and become their king. The Kanchipuram assembly now hoped to persuade one of the Prince's descendants to return and claim the Pallava crown.

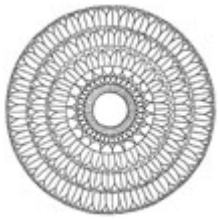
A delegation was sent off and 'travelled a long way to find a successor to the throne, passing through many mountains, rivers, forests, and depths', until it reached the lost heir and brought him back to Kanchipuram. Here he eventually saw off his rivals and became in due course possibly the most renowned of the Pallava kings, Nandivarman II, builder of one of the greatest of all south Indian temples, the Vaikuntha Perumal temple, where this story is told both in a sculpture and in an inscription in stone on the south wall.[84]

The panel and its inscription are part of an extraordinary narrative frieze: thirty huge panels arranged like a vast dynastic cartoon strip, where the ladies of the Pallava court ride out, two to an elephant, messengers arrive breathless in packed halls of audience and ambassadors from China sue for peace and alliances. Defeated monarchs flee into exile to escape the arrows of the Pallava chariot archers; great chests of booty are carried back from seaborne expeditions; and lines of fettered slaves are led off into captivity, as the courtiers feast and dancing girls celebrate the victories.

Throughout – whether in diplomatic missions, elephant battles or the building of temples – all these activities take place in a world where at every level the frontier between the divine and the human remains infinitely porous. Vishnu, Brahma and especially Shiva turn up to give advice at the Pallava court and they regularly intervene in battles. Pictures of the divine family of Shiva directly echo those of the Pallava dynasty. Only the number of arms and heads distinguishes one from the other.

Today, the Vaikuntha Perumal temple is half-deserted and half-ruined: so rich is the heritage of Kanchipuram and so numerous are its shrines that this small dynastic centre is often overlooked by both visitors and local pilgrims; indeed, one of its outer courts has been taken over as the cement warehouse of a nearby factory. But this small temple may hold the key to one of the most extraordinary moments in south Indian history, for some scholars believe the sculptures are evidence that the young Nandivarman returned to Kanchipuram not from another part of India but from distant Cambodia, and that it was a Khmer branch of the Pallava family who henceforth ruled over much of South India.

The evidence is far from conclusive, and many scholars are profoundly sceptical about the idea: it is more likely that Nandivarman II simply grew up outside the Kaveri delta, in some distant part of southern India. But in addition to many otherwise inexplicable cultural links between Cambodia and the Coromandel coast there are circumstantial hints that the Pallavas maintained strong links to South-east Asia: inscriptions by Nandivarman II have been found at both Kedah in Malaysia and Takua Pa in Thailand, where there is in addition a tall image of Vishnu carved in a pure Pallava style, accompanied by kneeling images of his consort Bhudevi and the sage Markandeya – iconography otherwise found only in Tamil Nadu.[85]



If there is a question mark over direct political links between the Pallavas and the Khmers, there is absolutely no doubt about the political and economic alliance formed between the Khmers and the Pallavas' successors, the great Cholas of Thanjavur.

This dynasty grew to become the most powerful of all south Indian empires after their defeat of their rivals: the Pallavas, their one-time overlords, were vanquished in 903; the Pandiyas of Madurai fell before their armies in 920; and the Cheras of Kerala in 993. Their control of the entire southern coastline is still commemorated in the Tamil term for the eastern coast: Coromandel is a corruption of Chola Mandala, the 'Circle of Chola Rule'.[86]

By the eleventh century, Khmer traders and the Cholas' armed merchant fleets, controlled by the powerful Tamil trade guilds, were between them dominating the economy of the Bay of Bengal. The Tamil guilds had set up their own fortified settlement at Takua Pa, while the Khmers wished to divert lucrative trade from the Straits of Malacca, under Srivijaya's control, to the Isthmus of Kra, which fell under their rule.[87] Cholas and Khmers realised that their interests coalesced, and there are inscriptions attesting to the friendly relations between them, as well as gifts of jewels and a golden chariot that passed between the two in 1020.[88]

Both kingdoms benefited from the wealth and the growing taste for rare luxuries in China, where the population had nearly doubled under the Song dynasty's peaceful rule. They also had a common rival: the Buddhists of Srivijaya, the maritime confederation of semi-autonomous Lords of the Sea and Masters of the Ports of South-east Asia. The Sea Lords of Srivijaya between them controlled the Malacca Straits and taxed all shipping passing through them towards China. Those ships that tried to avoid the toll were attacked and destroyed by the swift ships of the Srivijaya navy, which operated out of the riverine port of Palembang. This was a place of legendary wealth and almost mythical reserves of gold, which like an eastern Venice was built on wooden piles and stilts perched on the Musi river. It offered shelter from the heavy monsoon storms; it had also become a place of notable Buddhist scholarship.[89]

The kings of Srivijaya seem to have triggered the enmity of the Cholas by playing a double game. In the eleventh century they began despatching friendly messages to the Cholas, and even sending money to build a Buddhist monastery at the Chola port of Nagapattinam, while simultaneously pretending to the Chinese in Chang'an that the Cholas were a small and unimportant vassal state under their sovereignty and 'subject to Srivijaya'.[90] The Cholas opened diplomatic relations with China in 1015 and, when word of this double game reached Tanjore, Rajendra Chola, 'Lord of Kings', decided to punish the King of Srivijaya and to show off his military strength.

The Srivijayans probably did not realise what they had taken on when they crossed Rajendra Chola. The Chola King was already one of the towering figures of south Indian history, and his many conquests were notorious for their violence. His enemies accused him of breaking the acknowledged rules of war: the Chalukyas charged him with 'ravaging the whole country, perpetrating the murder of women and Brahmans'. The Sri Lankan chronicles, meanwhile, accused his troops of behaving like 'blood-sucking *yakkhas* [capricious nature spirits]' as they captured and abducted women of royal blood, looted the crown jewels of Anuradhapura, burned down Buddhist monasteries and appropriated their golden images and monastic treasuries by breaking open stupas and seizing the jewelled reliquaries within.[91]

Rajendra Chola succeeded his powerful father, Rajaraja Chola, in 1014. He first quelled rebellions among his immediate neighbours in south India, the Pandyas and Cheras, and in 1017 launched a new invasion of Sri Lanka, probably judging from his inscriptions, with the intention of seizing as much gold and booty as possible. This led to Chola control of the whole island for the first time. In 1018, Rajendra led small naval expeditions against the Maldives and Lakshadweep islands, turning both into what were effectively Chola colonies.

In 1021 he conquered the Chalukyas of Kalyana, who then controlled much of the Deccan. In 1019, Rajendra sent another expedition against northern Karnataka and southern Maharashtra. Then in 1022 he

marched his army 1,000 miles north to the Ganges and beyond, subduing the powerful kings of Orissa and Bengal, before marching south again with piles of precious gems as well as precious and numinous sacred idols of their state deities and jars full of sacred Ganges water. In memory of this, Rajendra assumed the title Gangaikonda-Chola: 'The Chola Who Seized the Ganges'.[92]

Confident in his ability to project his power overseas following his lucrative looting raids on the Maldives and Sri Lanka, Rajendra Chola decided on an unprecedented move: to send a Chola armada all the way to Sumatra, possibly in a joint operation with the ships of the Tamil merchant guilds. A first tentative military confrontation between the Cholas and the Srivijayans may have taken place in 1017, when a dated inscription calls Rajendra 'the Victor of Kataha', a town in modern Malaysia.[93] But in 1025 Rajendra sent his fleet of warships to raid and burn the ports of Srivijaya, the Buddhist trading rival of both the Cholas and their Khmer allies. The rich gifts presented to the Cholas by Suryavarman of Angkor were probably connected to a treaty, of which this expedition was the agreed culmination.[94]

The war fleet, which must have been very large, presumably assembled in Nagapattinam, then the principal Chola port, where the cavalry and perhaps the elephants would have been loaded into the holds. They probably set sail on the April winds via one of the Chola colonial ports in Sri Lanka. They then went on to surprise, storm and sack the ports of Sumatra, Takua Pa in Thailand and Kedah in Malaysia. During the raid, the ruthless Rajendra captured and abducted the last of the powerful Sailendra kings in what was an apparently unprecedented long-distance overseas naval action by a South Asian state. Rajendra Chola was understandably proud of his overseas military achievements and the loot it had generated, and he had it all recorded on the south wall of his Great Temple at Tanjore in 1027.

Almost everything we know about the Chola naval assault on Srivijaya, the great naval power of its day, comes from this one inscription, and while it is likely to present the achievements of Rajendra in the most flattering possible light, there is no reason to doubt the outlines of what it states.

It commences by recounting Rajendra's victorious campaigns within India that culminated in his march to the Ganges, and then turns its attention to Rajendra's extraordinarily ambitious naval expedition to the Lands of Gold. 'Having despatched many ships in the midst of rolling seas,' it declares, 'and having seized the king of Kedaram, together with the elephants of his glorious army, he [Rajendra] took Srivijaya with the large heaps of treasure which that king had accumulated, the "war gate" of the city, the "jewel gate" adorned with great splendour and the "gate of large jewels".'[95] All three of these bejewelled gates were taken as loot and shipped back to the Chola capital of Tanjore in triumph. He then records that he also took and conquered a string of South-east Asian ports, including:

> Pannai with waters lapping against its landing ghats …
> Ancient Malaiyur with a strong mountain for its rampart,
> Great Yirudingam surrounded by the deep sea as a moat …
> Lankasokam that is undaunted in fierce battles …
> Great Pappalam having abundant high waters as defence …
> Valaippanduru with cultivated field and jungle …
> Takkolam, praised by men versed in the sciences
> Great Tamalingam, firm in great and fierce battles …
> Lamuridesam [Aceh], of fierce strength and impetuous nature …
> Great Nakkavaram, full of flower gardens overflowing with honey …
> Kedaram [Kedah], of fierce strength, protected by the deep sea.[96]

Six of the places named seem to be on the Malay peninsula, four in Sumatra and one in the Nicobar islands.[97] The Cholas may also have landed in what is now Singapore, where an inscribed boulder seems to bear one of Rajendra Chola's many titles.[98]

The situation is highly unclear, but for perhaps nearly a century the Cholas appear to have dominated, and maybe ruled, the northern end of the Thai–Malay peninsula.[99] Perhaps more importantly, they also seem to have controlled the Straits of Malacca as a mercantile–settler colony, just as they then held much of Sri Lanka, Lakshadweep and the Maldives: Chola court poets describe their patrons as the 'Kedaram-possessing Chola'. In celebration of their achievement, several settlements in the Kaveri delta were renamed Kedaramkondan, 'Conqueror of Kedaram', in honour of the local captains who had commanded these Chola marines on their risky long-distance expedition.[100]

For some years after the expedition, the region was, at least initially, administered by a Chola viceroy,

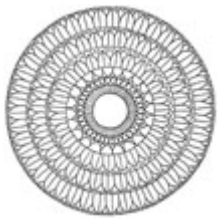
usually a Chola prince, who also claimed hegemony over Java. One of these Chola viceroys, Prince Kulottungga, later ascended the Chola throne.[101] But the impact of the Chola naval expedition on Sumatra itself appears to have been modest; after three quiet years during which the Chinese Emperor complained that 'foreign shipping rarely comes to Canton', Srivijaya seems to have recovered sufficiently from its defeats to again send a large diplomatic mission to China.[102]

The principal point of the Chola navy's thrust into South-east Asia was probably never direct territorial conquest, as earlier generations of historians once believed. Instead, it seems mainly to have been a calculated use of military muscle in a trade war aimed at loosening Srivijaya's hold over the straits and the region's other sea routes. It was intended to help open up a more lucrative trade with China, which was then in the grip of a passion for black pepper, spices, forest products and cotton textiles which the Cholas and their powerful merchant guilds wished to supply at great profit.[103]

Grateful that Srivijaya had been put on the defensive, the Cholas then sent a dazzling embassy to Chang'an, loading the Chinese Emperor with gifts of 'elephant tusks, frankincense, pearls, rosewater, rhinoceros horns, brocade, glass and plumflower'.[104] Before long, three Brahmanical temples had been established in Guangzhou, one of which, a small Chola Shiva temple, still stands in part.[105] A unique Chinese stele records how the Chola Prince Divaakara, the Viceroy of Kedaram, provided the funds and artisans for its restoration as late as 1067–9.[106]

But the biggest beneficiaries were the Tamil merchant guilds such as the Five Hundred. Their presence in South-east Asia greatly expanded after 1025, and their increased dominance of the region's trade is recorded in inscription after inscription. These can be found in their fortified enclaves, tanks and temples at Barus in north-western Sumatra, at a Shiva sanctuary in Kedah and on Kota Cina in Malaysia; other outposts are dotted around Thailand and Myanmar.[107] The guilds may never have achieved the monopoly of the China trade that was probably their hope in 1025, but like precursors of the later East India Company, the guilds did manage to set up a string of armed settlements and mercantile enclaves in Sumatra and Kedah and across the region.

From these, the guild's annual monsoon merchant fleet brought back valuable shiploads of aromatic resins and woods, incense, camphor, pearls, Chinese ceramics and above all gold over the busy sea roads that led to their Coromandel ports.[108]



The rise of the Chola's Khmer allies culminated a century later in the building of the largest and most magnificent Hindu temple in the world at Angkor Wat. The temple alone covers over 500 acres. Beyond stretches a palace complex, pleasure lakes and the quarters of the Khmer capital city so vast it can be seen from space. It is a temple town which is based almost entirely on architectural forms first pioneered in India, and whose genius flowed from Indian religious, technological, literary and artistic inspiration; yet it was never an Indian city. It is the ultimate statement of how much the Khmers absorbed Indic culture but also made it their own. As Rabindranath Tagore put it after visiting South-east Asia in 1927, 'Everywhere I could see India, yet I could not recognise it.'

Indeed there was nothing of the scale of Angkor at the time in India, the centre of the Hindu world to which the Khmers looked as a holy land. Angkor Wat is roughly contemporary to the great south Indian Chola temples of Tanjore and Chidambaram, and the Khmers and Cholas, the two great powers of the Indian Ocean world, were firm allies and in close diplomatic dialogue. Nevertheless, although the largest Chola temples are around five times the size of anything that preceded them in India, the Khmer temples still dwarf their Indian contemporaries several times over. Representing a massive increase in scale, Angkor is not just the most spectacular of all Indic temples, it is the largest religious structure built anywhere in the ancient or medieval world.

Its builder was the greatest of all South-east Asian rulers, Raja Suryavarman II, 'He Who is Protected by the Sun', who was anointed king in 1113 by the venerable Brahmin Divakara Pandita and performed sacrifices to the spirits of the ancestors. The gifts included 'two fans of peacock feathers with golden

handles, four white parasols, ear ornaments and golden bowls, workers, elephants and sacred brown cattle'.[109]

Suryavarman had had to fight his way to the throne and massacre half his relatives to gain power 'while still very young, at the end of his studies'.[110] He also had to campaign against the Khmers' great rivals, the Vietnamese Chams and the kings of Dai Viet, installing his own brother-in-law on their thrones, so creating the largest empire in the history of South-east Asia. The Khmer Empire now stretched across the region, controlling with varying degrees of authority modern Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand and Laos. It was the unchallenged hyperpower around the Gulf of Thailand and across all of mainland South-east Asia.

Once he had defeated his different enemies, internal and external, Suryavarman began to plan the building complex that would immortalise him. Work started on Angkor Wat in 1122. The central statue, devoted, unusually, to Vishnu rather than to Lord Shiva, was dedicated in July 1131, Suryavarman's thirty-third birthday.[111] The complex would not be finished until after Suryavarman's death in 1150, and took three decades of hard labour to complete. The moat alone took 5,000 men ten years of digging, while the temple inside it contains more stone than the largest Egyptian pyramid. Yet no mortar was used – the stones were fitted together with joints and tenons rather than lime mortar – and almost every inch was intricately carved, *in situ*, by stonemasons of great skill and imagination. Somehow this vast project was completed in just thirty-two years, a fraction of the time it took to build the much smaller cathedrals of medieval Europe.

Out of the trees of the Cambodian jungle, a mountain of masonry rises in successive ranges – a great tumbling scree of plinths and capitals, octagonal pillars and lotus jambs. Shingled temple roofs cover intricate reliefs of Indic *naga* snakes, lions and elephants, gods and godlings, sprites and tree spirits, dreadlocked holy men and miles of friezes of heavenly musicians and dancing girls, each individualised and many with the lively humanity of actual portraits. The complex was intended to represent both a microcosm of the Hindu universe and the personal funerary chapel and mausoleum for its deified builder where he enjoyed communion with the god: at its very centre the King's remains were carefully placed in a stone container in the tallest tower of Angkor, a concept which has no direct parallel in any monument in India, but which seems to echo the Buddhist tradition of placing relics at the heart of a stupa.[112]

Around it was built a *mandala* of concentric courtyards surrounding the central pyramid, on top of which a quincunx of five towers rise in a very literal recreation of scriptural depictions of Mount Meru, the mythic home of the Hindu gods, surrounded by the oceans, represented by the enormous moat. The whole is animated by a complex celestial arithmetic: a coded numerology and a series of solar and lunar alignments linking it with astronomical events, particularly the spring equinox. This makes it, among its other functions, an extraordinary and unique cosmological observatory. The northern face even shows the exact constellation of the planets at the time of the consecration ceremony at the end of July 1131.[113]

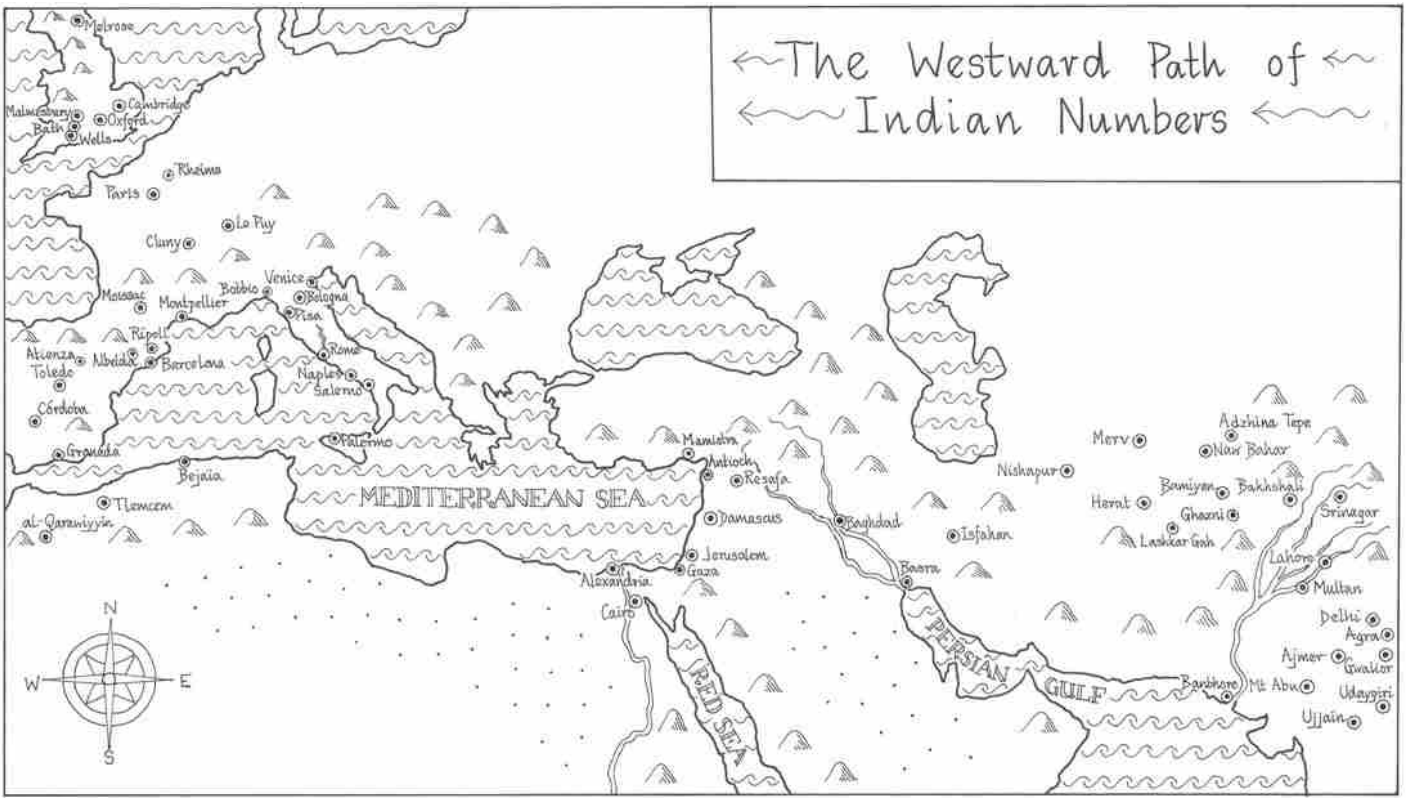
Inside, the West Gallery was decorated with the largest of all Khmer narrative reliefs and what is certainly the largest sculptural representation ever carved of both the great Indian epics. Elsewhere we see a wide range of Indic myths: Vishnu's victory over the *asuras*, the Churning of the Oceans and the Judgement of Yama. The Khmer kings clearly saw themselves as living inside a world inspired by Indic mythology and populated by all the gods and heroes of the epics.

That such a world was successfully recreated in the rice fields of Cambodia is demonstrated by the stunning half-mile-long frieze narrating the apocalyptic battle of Kurukshetra. This is placed suggestively next to a similar frieze depicting the victorious armies following the war elephants of Suryavarman II. The viewer is invited to transpose the two and reflect on the power wielded by the monarch and his place in history.[114] The whole scheme has been interpreted as showing how Suryavarman had ended the Kali Yuga, the Age of Disaster which had begun at Kurukshetra, and changed the entire cosmic cycle to inaugurate a new Khmer Golden Age.[115]

But even as this largest ever Hindu temple was being erected in Cambodia, another set of Indian ideas was travelling westward. The effect of these ideas – more practical and utilitarian than the arts which were transmitted eastwards – would be even more revolutionary than those which took such dramatic new life in South-east Asia.

For at exactly the time when the quincunx of Angkor was rising out of the Cambodian jungle, Indian numbers, the idea of zero and the algorithm were all arriving on the distant shores of Spain and Italy. This transformed for ever the way not just Europeans but, in time, the whole world would understand the mysterious alchemy of higher mathematics. These innovations would assist in kicking off a revolution in commerce, leading ironically to the creation of trading companies that would pioneer the domination of

Europe over Asia in the centuries to come.


The Westward Path of Indian Numbers
Melrose
Malmesbury
Bath
Wells
Cambridge
Oxford
Rheims
Paris
Cluny
Le Puy
Venice
Bobbio
Bologna
Massaat
Montpellier
Pisa
Ripoll
Rome
Atienza
Toledo
Nbeida
Barcelona
Naples
Salerno
Córdoba
Palermo
Granada
Bejaia
Tlemcem
al-Qarawiyyin
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
Mamistra
Antioch
Resafa
Damascus
Jerusalem
Gaza
Alexandria
Cairo
RED SEA
Baghdad
Basra
Isfahan
PERSIAN GULF
Nishapur
Merv
Adzhina Tepe
Nau Bahar
Herat
Bamiyan
Bakhshali
Ghazni
Lashkar Gah
Srinagar
Lahore
Multan
Delhi
Agra
Ajmer
Gwalior
Barbhore
Mt. Abu
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The Treasury of the Books of Wisdom

9

In the winter of 773, a delegation from the Raja of Sindh arrived in the newly built city of Baghdad.

The great circular city, capital of the young Abbasid Caliphate and the centre of the Islamic world, was only nine years old, but already it was one of the largest conurbations in the world. Its cosmopolitan population numbered more than half a million souls, a melting pot full not just of diverse Arab tribes but also of Persians, Turks, Africans, Armenians, Indians, Jews, Syrians, Slavs and Byzantine Greeks. It was a magnificent sight, dazzling travellers with its grand new palaces, mosques, colleges, libraries and pleasure gardens spread out for several miles along the fertile banks of the Tigris.

The Sindhi court, which had despatched the embassy, had good reason to maintain friendly relations with Caliph Mansur. His dominions stretched out westwards as far as the coast of Tunisia and northwards to the frontiers of Tang China.

The outlines of this empire had been established a century and a half earlier when, in response to the message of the Prophet Muhammad, the first Arab armies of Islam had erupted out of the Hejaz. These armies brought down not just the Sasanian Persian Empire in all its ancient glory, but also the eastern half of the Christian Byzantine Empire, taking under their control much of the richest lands between the Pyrenees and the Karakorums. The border with China, however, was much more recent, and had been established only twenty-two years earlier when the Arabs had inflicted a bloody defeat on the massed troops of Tang China at the Battle of Talas in 751. The Indus, which now formed the frontier with the patchwork of Hindu courts lying to the east, was easily crossed in the dry season, and the Sindhis had no wish to create any offence, or give any excuse, which might propel the Abbasid armies across the river and into their realm.

For this reason, the delegation came bearing rich gifts. But one present was particularly anticipated; indeed, it had been specifically requested by none other than the Chief Vizier who had sent out emissaries to search for it. This gift was not jewels or gold or mangoes or spices, nor intricate cotton weaves nor any of the other celebrated products of Sindh. Instead, it was a single handwritten manuscript. Along with that text there came a group of Brahmin astrologers and sages from the Indian city of Ujjain who had been specially chosen to explain its contents. One of these, named Kanika ‘the Indian’, became a celebrated figure in histories of Islamic astronomy.[1]

The manuscript, which the Arabs came to call *The Great Sindhind*, was in some ways a surprising gift, in that it was in essence a book of complex mathematical theory. It contained a variety of innovative ideas about science, astronomy, astrology and mathematics, but – as was then the norm in India with such texts – it was written as a rhyming Sanskrit poem. This made it much easier for students to memorise, but the terse, dense, difficult Sanskrit verse only added to the struggles of the same students trying to understand the ideas contained within it. Such verses were usually accompanied by voluminous explanatory prose commentaries. In this case, however, Kanika and his Brahmins had come to provide the commentary in person.

The text of this edition of the *Sindhind* no longer survives; all that exists today are much later and possibly very different manuscript versions, and its original form is not entirely clear. But according to the tenth-century account by the well-travelled Arab geographer al-Masudi it contained all that the Hindus knew of the spheres and the stars. It was a compilation of important scientific texts, and therefore, in an age when such knowledge was scattered and fragmented, a gift of incalculable value.

The author and compiler was one of the supreme scientific minds of Indian history, the great Brahmagupta (598–c.670). Born near the Rajasthani hill station of Mount Abu, Brahmagupta lived most of his early life in Bhillamala – modern Bhinmal. In 628, when he was thirty years old, he wrote a twenty-five-chapter treatise on mathematics later known as *The Opening of the Universe*, which was immediately recognised as a work of extraordinary subtlety and genius.[2]

In it, Brahmagupta speculated at length, and for the first time, about the qualities of the number zero. Brahmagupta's work also contained within it other crucial Indian mathematical ideas developed by earlier generations of Brahmin scholars, such as the concept of positional notation, the idea of writing numbers with just ten digits, but arranged in decimal columns of tens, hundreds and thousands. The text also came with a complete set of trigonometry tables of sines and versines from which the Arabs fashioned a set of accurate astronomical tables.

Indian ideas about science and maths had long intrigued and dazzled the intellectuals of the Middle East. As early as the late second century bce, an inscription at the Greek city of Miletos, on the distant coast of Anatolia, cites the Indian scholar Kallaneus – probably a Greek rendering of the Sanskrit Kalyana – as an authority on the movements of the stars and meterology.[3] Eight hundred years after this, in 662 ce, the Syrian Monophysite Bishop Severus Sebokht wrote with similar reverence of 'the science of the Indians, including their subtle discoveries in astronomy, discoveries that were more ingenious than those of the Greeks and Babylonians, and of their valuable methods of calculation which surpass description … done by means of nine signs'.[4]

But the *Sindhind* contained even more than this. Later in his life, Brahmagupta had gone on to become the head of the astronomical observatory at Ujjain, the foremost centre for the study of the stars in ancient India. A century or so before the embassy to Baghdad, in 664–5, at the age of sixty-seven, Brahmagupta had written a practical manual of Indian astronomy and a guide to astronomical techniques and instruments. This summarised his ideas on the stars and the skies, enabling the prediction of eclipses and bringing together his different astronomical and astrological discoveries. The *Sindhind* seems to have been an edition of both of Brahmagupta's key texts rolled into one.[5]

Caliph Mansur (714–75) was renowned as a patron of scholarship, and he received the book eagerly. Immediately understanding its importance, he gave orders to have it translated by his celebrated chief astronomer, Muhammad al-Fazari, 'so that the Arabs might understand the motions of the planets'. Al-Fazari was a philosopher, mathematician and the principal scientific adviser to the Abbasid court, renowned in his day as being 'outstanding in the science of the stars, a speaker of future events and experienced in the properties of the planets'.[6]

Al-Fazari had already built the first astrolabe in the Islamic world, as well as creating the first astronomical tables; he had also filled ten volumes with his astrological poems. He apparently learned and understood some Sanskrit, which at this period was considered a prerequisite for any who wished to understand the latest advances in the science of the stars. It was he who, with the help of Kanika and the other visiting Brahmins of Ujjain, all 'experts in the motions of the planets and the operation of the spheres and their eclipses', first began the difficult task of translating the abstruse and sometimes obscure Sanskrit poetry of the *Sindhind* into clear and comprehensible Arabic prose, so that none of the most subtle nuances of the Sanskrit would be lost.[7]

But one person in Baghdad who did not require any translation was the powerful Chief Vizier, Khalid ibn

Barmak. It seems that Barmak was not only able to read the *Sindhind* with fluency but already had training in Indian mathematics and astronomy. Indeed, it was probably his extraordinary facility with numbers that had first led to his rapid rise to power, initially as paymaster to the Caliph and then, later, taking on the rest of the administration. Even the Vizier's name, Barmak, was an Arabicisation of a Sanskrit word, Pramukh, meaning 'headman' or simply 'boss'.

For the Vizier and his children, who would in due course succeed him at the helm of affairs of the Empire, all knew more about Indian science than many of their subjects may have realised. Before their conversion to Islam, the Barmakids had been Hereditary Rectors of one of the most important institutions of learning in the Indosphere. This was Naw Bahar, or in Sanskrit Nava-vihara, the 'New Monastery' of Balkh, the greatest Buddhist centre of learning in what is now Afghanistan, and in many ways the Nalanda of Central Asia.[8] For centuries, from this base, the Barmakids had been intellectual intermediaries between India and Persianate Central Asia, and under their guidance Naw Bahar had become a major centre for the translation and editing of Buddhist texts from India as they made their way northwards and eastwards on the trade routes up to China.

The head of the Barmakid family was the hereditary ruler of the Balkh oasis on behalf of the Buddhist monastic principality he governed. The Barmakids had married into many of the royal families of the upper Oxus 'and all the inhabitants of that district were slaves upon whom he adjudicated however he wished … They likened the building to Mecca [in prestige and importance] … Their custom, whenever they arrived at the monastery, was to bow down to the biggest idol and kiss Barmak's hand.'[9]

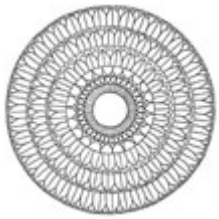
Long before his conversion to Islam, when still a young student of Buddhism, the Vizier's father, the original Barmak, had travelled to another of the main centres of Indian learning, the Valley of Kashmir. There he had spent several years studying 'astrology, medicine and the branches of philosophy'.[10] The Barmakids, in other words, were not just interested in the wonders of Indic mathematics and science, they were an important part of that tradition, educated at some of the greatest centres of Indic learning of the day.[11]

For two generations in the eighth and early ninth centuries, it was this sophisticated Indophile, Khalid ibn Barmak and his scholarly son Yahya, who brought to the Arabs much that was most remarkable about the learning and science of India and the Sanskrit Cosmopolis which stretched all the way from Buddhist Central Asia to Bali.

Later, it was Khalid who had personally helped plan Baghdad on a circular design, common in his native Central Asia and probably originally inspired by the Indian concept of the *mandala*.[12] Once the new city was built, he and his son had sought out the learning of ancient India and helped to transfuse it into the lifeblood of the young Islamic capital. From their salons and studies, they also helped to give the Abbasid court the spirit of intellectual enquiry that allowed it hungrily to begin absorbing diverse ideas from both east and west, and from all the great civilisations of classical antiquity: Greek, Egyptian, Babylonian, Persian and Chinese. The most recent borrowing from the latter was the crucial innovation of paper; the Barmakids had recently set up the first paper mill in Baghdad, said to have been run by Chinese prisoners of war captured on the battlefield of Talas.[13]

But, for all the breadth of their interests, the Sanskrit world of India remained the abiding passion of the Barmakids, so much so that some envious rivals gossiped that the family were secretly still Buddhists and that they would smile excitedly at any mention of Indian religions: 'When polytheism is mentioned in a learned session, the Barmakids' faces light up / and if a verse [of the Koran] is recited among them, they bring up stories about Mazdak [a famous pre-Islamic heretic].'[14] Either way, the Barmakids became the now forgotten but vital link between the ancient knowledge systems of India and those beginning to develop in the Arab world. In time, the works that they commissioned also became the link with the new learning of Mediterranean Europe.

Many years later, in eleventh-century Toledo, the *Sindhind* would be translated on from Arabic into both Hebrew and Latin. From there, according to the leading scholar of the subject, along with Euclid and the astronomy of ancient Greece 'it became the basis of the astronomy of [medieval] Western Europe'.[15] It is therefore largely because of the wide-ranging interests and enlightened patronage of the Barmakid family that not only Indian astronomy but Indian numerals and mathematics passed to the Arabs, and hence on to the wider world, so giving us the numerals, the decimal system and basic methods of calculation that we all still use today.[16]



The mathematical and astrological disciplines that Barmak had learned in Kashmir – the long history of Indian mathematics, sky-gazing and the arts of celestial prediction – were traditions that stretched back many thousands of years.

Towards the end of the first millennium bce, texts in Sanskrit begin to reveal the sophisticated techniques of geometry and mathematical astronomy which were necessary properly to align Vedic rituals with the movements of the heavens.[17] Over the centuries which followed, these Indian mathematical ideas were cross-fertilised by new ideas harvested from the discoveries of the Babylonians and the Achaemenid Persians, whose ideas were circulating in north India well before Alexander's invasion.

The arrival of the Macedonian legions in 326 bce brought Indian scholars into direct contact with the astronomical findings of the ancient Greeks, and by the time of Emperor Ashoka, in the middle of the third century bce, India had adopted the twelve signs of the originally Babylonian Zodiac, as well as Hellenistic spherical geometry, celestial coordinate systems and the basic trigonometry of chords, all of which had their genesis in ancient Greece.

But already in the Brahmi inscriptions of Ashoka, from 250 bce on, there are signs of Indian scientific innovation, most particularly the invention of the nine numerical symbols we all use today: indeed the number symbols 2, 5 and 7 are virtually unchanged since then. A little later come inscriptions with a written symbol for zero. Over the following thousand years, Indian mathematics went through its Golden Age, as Indian scholars developed what was then the richest and most dazzling mathematical tradition in the world, making huge strides in arithmetic, algebra, geometry, trigonometry and particularly astronomy.[18]

Many of these advances took place under the rule of one of India's most celebrated dynasties, the Guptas, who presided over large swathes of the Gangetic plain of north India from the early fourth to the late sixth century ce. This was a moment of supreme self-confidence in Indian civilisation, when its arts, philosophy and learning were most widely admired. This was when the Puranas, which form the template for much of modern Hinduism, were reaching their final shape, when Dinnaga was formulating the science of Buddhist logic and when the medical works of Sushruta were in many respects ahead of Galen and contemporary Chinese medical texts. This was also the moment that Sanskrit prose, drama and poetry had reached their apogee, and when the playwright Kalidasa (c.400–55 ce), was writing his great masterworks, including *Shakuntala* and *The Cloud Messenger*. Around the same time, the *Kama Sutra* was being compiled to enhance the pleasures of the leisured young men of Indian towns.[19]

For all their enormous cultural legacy, physical evidence of Gupta rule today is frustratingly scant and scattered, and the Guptas are, so far, less visible archaeologically than their Kushan predecessors. But one of the places that still demonstrates their extraordinary curiosity and self-confidence is the sacred complex they built at Udaygiri in central India. Here, around 400 ce, the victorious Chandragupta II celebrated his victory over Shaka invaders from the north-west by carving caves to honeycomb the 'Mountain of the Sunrise' with sculptures of the different incarnations of his preferred deity, Lord Vishnu.[20]

The most remarkable is the triumphant, larger-than-life-size and fabulously muscular god-boar, Varaha. He stands at once energetic, glorious and assertive, in front of the now headless Gupta monarch, one foot crushing the coils of a prostrate and terrified *naga* serpent king, his muscles rippling, dressed only in a scanty waist wrap, a totem of divine victory as he emerges dripping and snorting from the deluge of the Cosmic Waters that had engulfed the world. On to his tusk clings the tiny, vulnerable, half-naked figure of Mother Earth, her feet supported by a lotus stalk emerging from the deep. It is a brilliant representation of the defenceless fragility of our world in the face of the unpredictable violence of our Cosmos.

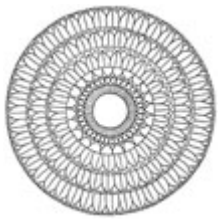
These magnificent sculptures of the incarnations of Vishnu, defeating in turn each of his demonic adversaries, have long been admired. What has only recently become clear is that Udaygiri was not just a sacred place for Gupta religious rituals, it was also a major centre for early Indian science, located exactly where the Tropic of Cancer lay at that time.[21] The Mountain of the Sunrise was, in addition to its ritual

functions, a laboratory for astronomical and celestial observation, timekeeping and calendar-making, complete with water clocks, sundials, sightlines, observation platforms, astronomical images carved on a stone lotus petal and capitals engraved with the figures of the zodiac from two different astrological systems. It was probably also the original location of the celebrated Iron Pillar, now in Delhi, whose eternally rustless metallurgy is sometimes said to be one of the Guptas' great scientific achievements.[22]

Brahminical Hindu rituals were conducted here that related to the equinox and the two solstices as well as the Festival of the Rainy Season, which celebrated the awakening of the site's patron deity, Vishnu. This was linked to both the rebirth of the land after the rains and Vedic rites of royal consecration. Under the patronage of two of ancient India's most powerful Hindu rulers, 'the king of kings' Chandragupta II and his son Kumaragupta I, the monsoon rituals of rebirth were intertwined with the cult of Vishnu, regarded as the source of creation and the essence of cosmic time.

These two worlds, the scientific and the religious, were not seen as separate, for the Guptas, like all other Indian dynasties, conflated mathematics, astronomy, calendrics, divination and astrology into a single discipline they called *jyotisa*.[23] The subject of *jyotisa* was how the stars and planets influenced human affairs, aiming to pierce, and peer through, the veil which separated the human world from the divine. For it was universally believed that the turning of the stars and the cycles of the heavens affected not just weather and climate, plagues and famines, but everything from individual personality and temperament to the outcome of affairs of state: battles, marriages and the rise and fall of dynasties.[24]

As Udaygiri shows, the Guptas also conflated the movement of the spheres and their own political destiny, aiming to utilise the power of Vishnu and the celestial bodies and, through Vedic rituals, transfer that strength and power to the body of the *chakravartin* king. The sophistication of Indian astronomy, which underlined all these new ideas, can still be seen in the sundials, water clocks and solstice-marking sightlines that are still carved into the weathered rocks of Udaygiri.[25]



It was around the time that the sightlines and water clocks were being carved at Udaygiri that Indian mathematicians first began to think hard about the concept of zero, 'one of the greatest abstractions that the human mind has ever achieved'.[26]

Indian thinkers achieved this conceptual leap in two separate steps. Under the influence of revitalised trade and commerce which had taken place under the Kushans and then the Guptas, Indian mathematicians first mastered the decimal system and place-value arithmetic, with separate columns for units, tens, hundreds and thousands. This enabled the efficient, compact representation of numbers, as well as facilitating complex arithmetic calculations that had previously been very difficult to perform.[27]

The earliest extant inscription in India with decimal place-value numerals is disputed: some claim the honour for a copperplate inscription in Gujarat, others suspect the plate to be a forgery and point instead to a temple inscription in Gwalior, not far from Udaygiri. Either way, there is a very early reference to decimal place values in the famous *Yoga-sutra* of Patanjali, around 150 ce, and within a few centuries this Indic decimal system had spread around the subcontinent and had even been exported to Hindu temples in South-east Asia, where zeros, represented as a dot, are found in several very early inscriptions.[28]

Mathematicians initially overcame the problem of denoting empty spaces in decimal place-value notation by drawing a space-holder dot where there was a missing entry. This was probably first tried out around 3000 bce in the temples of Sumer, not far from what would become Baghdad. The innovation was passed on to both the Babylonians and the Persians, but it was in India that the use of a circle gave rise to the present-day symbol 0 for zero. It was also the Indians who named that symbol *sunya*, meaning emptiness or the void, linking it to a fundamental concept in Indian Buddhist philosophy.[29] From this word came the Arabic *zifr* and hence the English 'cipher'.[30]

Only a few early Indian scientific texts have survived in their entirety, but their sophistication is breathtaking. The oldest which preserves the name of its writer is that composed by the great mathematician Aryabhata (476–550). He lived in the city of Pataliputra, modern Patna in Bihar, although

his childhood was spent further south at Asmaka on the banks of the Narmada. 'By the grace of Brahma,' he wrote, 'I dived deep in the ocean of astronomical theories, true and false, and rescued the precious sunken jewel of true knowledge by the means of the boat of my own intellect.'[31]

Aryabhata's work, written when he was only twenty-three, produced the first systematic compilation of Indian mathematical and astronomical knowledge. These secrets he presents as a series of concise, almost crystalline rules and playful scientific riddles, all arranged in just thirty-two Sanskrit verses which distil complex technical principles and data to their essence with extraordinary brevity. To help his pupils memorise his work, as a mnemonic aid, Aryabhata created his own alphabetical system where letters took the place of numbers, so creating unique 'words'.[32]

The *Aryabhatiya* covers arithmetic, squares, cubes, square roots, cube roots, triangles, the properties of a circle, algebra, fractions, quadratic equations and sines, and it utilises the decimal system with place value. It contains a very close approximation of the value of pi – 3.1416 – and perfected the 'rule of three' still used to compute ratios. It also deals with spherical trigonometry. The ease of making calculations using this system had direct implications for astronomy and allowed Aryabhata to calculate the movements of the planet, eclipses, the size of the earth and, astonishingly, the exact length of the solar year to an accuracy of seven decimal points.

Aryabhata was also remarkable for his description of the relativity of motion: 'Just as a man in a boat moving forward sees the stationary objects [on the shore] as moving backward,' he wrote, 'just so are the stationary stars seen by the people on earth as moving towards the west.' Putting these different insights together, Aryabhata correctly concluded, a full thousand years before Copernicus and Galileo, that the earth rotates about its axis daily, and that the apparent movement of the stars is a relative motion caused by the rotation of the earth, contrary to the prevailing view that it was the sky that rotated. What he got wrong was believing that the sun revolved around the earth rather than the other way round.

The second step in the full comprehension of the idea of zero took place with Brahmagupta, author of the *Sindhind* that would find its way to Abbasid Baghdad. He made it his job to continue and correct the work of Aryabhata about one hundred years after the latter's death. Brahmagupta was to treat the zero symbol as a number just like the other nine, rather than merely as a void or an absence.[33] This meant developing rules for doing arithmetic using this additional symbol along with the other nine.

Brahmagupta described zero as the answer you get when you subtract a number from itself. He also worked out some basic properties that zero must have such as when zero is added to a number or subtracted from a number, the number remains unchanged; and a number multiplied by zero becomes zero. He wrote down in Sanskrit verse a set of arithmetic rules for handling not only zero but positive and negative numbers, another of Brahmagupta's innovations. 'Positive divided by positive, or negative by negative, is affirmative,' he wrote. 'Positive divided by negative is negative. Negative divided by affirmative is negative.' These basic rules of mathematics for the first time allowed any number up to infinity to be expressed with just ten distinct symbols: the nine Indian numbers plus zero. The rules are still taught in classrooms around the world today.[34]

This second step was a major advance that had never previously been attempted elsewhere and it was this Indian reincarnation of zero as a number, rather than just as an absence, that transformed it and gave it its power. This crucial step was probably taken 200 years after the sundials and sculptures of Udaygiri were first carved, and while they were still in use.

The Indian system allowed mathematicians to use fancy tricks to add, subtract, multiply and divide numbers faster than an abacus could tally. Numbers now became distinct from geometry and could do more than merely measure. This new way of understanding the interplay of numbers led, in turn, to the birth of algebra.

By this stage Indians already knew how to work out square roots, as is clear from the unique survival of a birchbark manuscript discovered about fifty miles from Peshawar in what is now Pakistan. This was written by a mathematical polymath who identified himself as Chajaka – the 'King of Calculators'. He states that he wrote the text for the use of one 'Hasika son of Vasistha' and his descendants, in a place referred to as Martikavati in Gandhara.

Found in 1882 buried in a field near the village of Bakhshali, the manuscript is written in Sanskrit but in a form that has been strongly influenced by the vernaculars of the region. The script is Sharada, a north Indian descendant of Gupta Brahmi. Unfortunately, most of the manuscript was destroyed at the time of its discovery; and even the small portion that now remains is in a very mutilated state.

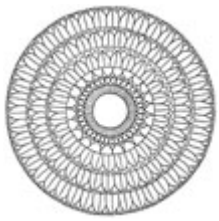
The Bakhshali Manuscript is by many centuries the oldest surviving Indic mathematical text and the oldest extant manuscript in the world to use zero and decimal place values. This remarkable artefact, now in Oxford, consists of seventy extremely delicate and fragile folios. It has long been the subject of intense scholarly debates over its date, its purpose, the religious world inhabited by its writers and the question of whether it is a unitary text or a collection. Over the years, the dates proposed for the Bakhshali Manuscript have varied from the third to the twelfth centuries ce, but it is currently thought to have been written around 700 ce, an hypothesis confirmed by a new set of carbon dates.[35]

Its author Chajaka was concerned with practical tasks like weighing metal, the composition of alloys and impure metals, refiling and working out losses in raw materials through smelting, and the payment of wages and gifts to his workers. He seems therefore to have been in the metal trade; living near the major Gandharan monastery of Takht-i-Bahi it is quite possible he was making metal statues for the monks. For that reason his manuscript is a very different and much more practical text than the abstract Brahmanical speculations of Aryabhata or the more astronomical and astrological focus of the *Sindhind*.[36]

The manuscript's consistency of appearance has led to the conclusion that it is a single work written by one hand, presumably by Chajaka himself, with a second hand seen in a single portion, maybe that of his pupil Hasika. The manuscript is a compendium of mathematical formulae, algorithms and examples, in the form of verse rules or sutras and sample problems, mixed with a prose commentary. It uses decimal place value, negative numbers, fractions, square roots and the earliest zero of any known manuscript, represented by large round dots. The zeros here function as arithmetical operators, in other words as numbers in their own right, and not merely as place-holder digits; they also represent Unknowns.[37] The manuscript shows us that the practical use of abstract mathematics was widely diffused at the time of its composition, so that even humble metalworkers used advanced calculation in their work.

It was the work of these great mathematicians, Aryabhata and Brahmagupta, along with a third, Varahamira, who brought in further Greek ideas from a text known in India as the *Yavana Sutra*, that formed the firm foundation of Indian mathematics and astronomical science. There may well be other crucial names which have now been forgotten, for less than a tenth of all surviving Sanskrit scientific manuscripts have yet been studied and published; even the work of Aryabhata was little known before it was rediscovered, and its importance grasped, as late as the 1950s.[38]

But the Arabs knew better. The fame and influence of these Indian master mathematicians was beginning to spread outside the boundaries of India and by the eighth century was providing inspiration to the astronomers and scientists of the wealthy and sophisticated court of Abbasid Baghdad.



The year 664 ce is, arguably, the moment that the Indosphere reached the peak of its influence. It is also the year when everything began to change.

In Ujjain, this was the year that Brahmagupta was putting the final touches to his great treatise on astronomy, while in China the Buddhist Empress Wu Zetian was also closely watching the skies and taking the advice of the group of Indian astronomers she had imported to Chang'an, led by Gautama Siddhartha, her astronomer royal. Seeing that the stars were in an auspicious conjunction, the Empress took the opportunity to perform the sacred rites of Fengshan, an ancient Chinese homage to heaven and earth, at the top of the sacred mountain of Tai Shan. She was the first woman ever to do so.[39]

That same year, to the south, the Pallava navies, anchored off Mamallapuram, were preparing their weapons and readying themselves for a seaborne attack on Anuradhapura, the capital of the Buddhist kingdom of Sri Lanka. This was also around the time that, at the Pallava court in Kanchipuram, Dandin found himself captivated by the Beautiful Woman of Avanti and began setting his passion down on paper in some of the most exquisite Sanskrit verse ever written. The same year, further to the east, on the far shores of the Bay of Bengal, under the influence of the Pashupatas, one of the first Khmer kings was in the process of building the City of Shiva at Sambor Prei Kuk and leaving some of the first inscriptions in an adaptation of Pallava script.[40]

It was then, at this critical moment when the Indosphere seemed to be unchallenged in its intellectual prestige across a great swathe of Asia, that a large, partly camel-borne Arab army began erecting their tents and siege engines outside the walls of the rich and sophisticated Buddhist city of Balkh, with its stupa 'one hundred cubits in diameter, with a circular arcade around it' decorated with paintings and precious gems, and hung with fragrant herbs, silk brocade and silk flags.[41]

They made short work of the great Buddhist monastery of Naw Bahar. Twenty years earlier, Xuanzang had stopped in there on his way to India and been dazzled by what he saw. He had also written admiringly of the scholarship of the monks. But he was among the last travellers who were able to do this. The massive remains of Naw Bahar can still be seen outside the ruined walls of Balkh, and it was this vulnerable position, undefended by the city walls, in a kingless monastic principality with no armed forces, that led to its instant surrender at the start of the siege by some of the first armies of Islam.[42]

But just as it was the conquest of northern India by the Kushans that opened the way for the Buddhist conquest of China, so it was the Ummayyad Arab conquest of Central Asia, and its absorption into the wider Islamic world, that opened the way for Indian learning to seduce the western mind with its brilliance and sophistication. For the hereditary rectors, or *pramukhas*, of Naw Bahar were pragmatic men as well as brilliant scholars and administrators. Realising the way the global winds were blowing, they surrendered their city and shortly afterwards made a formal conversion to the new Islamic faith that had propelled these warriors all the way from the Hejaz in one of the most surprising revolutions of history.

The only member of the aristocratic, landowning priesthood of Naw Bahar not to convert in 664 was the eldest son and heir of the hereditary rector. Barmak was not present at the siege of Balkh because he was that same year undertaking further studies in the other great centre of Central Asian learning, the Valley of Kashmir. Here Barmak dived deep into Indian mathematics, Ayurvedic medicine, Hindu and Buddhist astrology and the various branches of Indic philosophy.

In due course, when he returned to Balkh, he was sent by the new Arab overlords to the centre of their empire. This was Resafa, south of the Euphrates in Syria, where the Caliph, Hisham ibn 'Abd al-Malik (691–743), had built his favourite residence. Here Barmak and his son, Khalid ibn Barmak, were ostensibly to be educated in the new faith of Islam and the Arabic language. In reality, they were held as hostages, acting as a guarantee and security for the good behaviour of their family who had remained in charge of Balkh as governors and administrators for the new regime.

What must have seemed at the time a restrictive forced exile proved in due course to be an extraordinary stroke of luck. For, in Resafa, Khalid became the classmate and friend of the son of the Caliph. Moreover, he became especially close to another young Arab prince named Abu Ja'far al-Mansur. Such was the closeness of the two boys that in time their wives even suckled each other's children, a link which bound the Abbasid and Barmakid clans for four successive generations.[43]

Two decades later, long after father and son had returned to Balkh, Khalid fought alongside his friend when in 750 ce al-Mansur helped lead the revolution which ousted the reigning Ummayyad dynasty and replaced them with al-Mansur's Abbasids. Vital to their success was the assistance of Persian-speaking 'Khurasaniyya' or Central Asian troops, some of whom were brought by the Barmakids from Balkh.

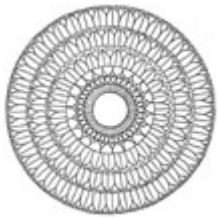
The revolution started at Merv in Central Asia in 747 ce, and the two armies met in battle on the banks of the River Zab, south of Mosul. The Khurasanis formed a spear wall, calmly kneeling in line with their lances directed at the oncoming Ummayyad cavalry. The spear wall held and the Abbasid armies finally swept into Damascus, the Ummayyad capital, in 750.[44]

In some ways it can be looked at as an eastern Persian counter-revolution against the Arabs who had conquered them only a generation or two earlier, one that resulted in the re-emergence of a briefly submerged Persian civilisation.[45] By the time that the revolution had reached its climax, Khalid ibn Barmak had become its chief secretary. One source mentions his financial and arithmetical skills, and notes how effectively he reorganised the accounts of the Abbasid army into bound books rather than the chaotic loose scrolls that had formerly been the basis of army accounting.[46]

It seems likely that Khalid had been trained, like his father and presumably the rest of his family, in Indian methods of arithmetic. Later, when peace was established, he was made the governor of Fars, which had been the centre of the old Sasanian Empire, and there 'worked wonders', including discovering the golden treasures of the old Persian kings, which they had hidden in the mountains when fleeing the Arab invasions.[47] Before long, Khalid had been promoted to be de facto vizier under the first Abbasid Caliph. He also advised the second Caliph, who was none other than his old friend and classmate from Resafa, al-

Mansur (r.754–75).

His first job was to build the Abbasids a new permanent capital, to be known as the City of Peace.



Khalid ibn Barmak planned the new capital on a vast scale, making full use of the extraordinarily large tax revenues brought in from across this rich new empire.

A new location was chosen by the Caliph on the western bank of the Tigris near the small Christian town of Baghdad, whose name the new capital eventually adopted. According to the historian al-Tabari, Caliph al-Mansur said, 'This is the proper site … Here is the Tigris, with nothing between us and China, for all that is from the sea can come to us on the river, as can the provisions of the Jazira, Armenia and the surrounding areas. And there is the Euphrates on which everything from Syria, Raqqa, and the surrounding areas may come.' He then dismounted and, 'pitching his camp by the Sarat canal, drew up a plan of the city, appointing a supervising officer for each of the projected quarters'.[48]

Under Khalid's influence, the model eventually chosen for the new city was the Central Asian geometrically perfect circular palace-city plan, which had been used for the former Sasanid capital of Ctesiphon, as also for both the great trading city of Merv and indeed for the Naw Bahar itself, Khalid's ancestral home.[49]

Before a single brick had been laid, the court astrologers met to choose an auspicious day: as well as the court stargazer, al-Fazari, there was a Persian Jewish scholar named Mash'allah, and a Zoroastrian named Nawbakht, prefiguring the multicultural nature of the city which they were about to inaugurate. Together this group drew up charts which determined the most propitious moment to lay the foundations.[50]

Construction began in 762, and al-Mansur moved into the palace city with its double brick walls and fortified gates the following year. As the capital of an enormous empire now stretching from Tunisia to the Indus, Baghdad was planned on an appropriate scale. Though it was initially little more than a permanent army camp, within a decade its population had grown to over a million. A Chinese visitor was astonished by the wealth of the place. 'Everything produced from the earth is there,' he wrote. 'Carts carry countless goods to markets, where everything is available and cheap: brocade, embroidered silks, pearls and other gems are displayed all over the markets and street shops.'[51]

It was not just wealth. The city attracted ambitious men from across the Empire, quickly replacing Basra and Damascus as the intellectual heart of the Islamic world. The newcomers came from many different backgrounds. The Bukhtishu family, for example, were Nestorian Christians (their name, in Farsi, means 'Saved by Jesus') from the Sasanian medical school at Jundishapur, who first came to favour when they cured the Caliph of food poisoning. They stayed on as doctors at court, and in time they wrote treatises on a variety of medical subjects, including a learned text on lovesickness.[52]

As well as doctors and surgeons, the court also welcomed cooks, calligraphers, miniature painters and a whole world that grew up around the Barmakids' paper mills: bookbinders, booksellers and librarians. The energetic young Barmakid vizier and his childhood friend the Caliph together set about turning their disparate dominions into a scientific and intellectual superpower. Their aim was to associate their new state with the great classical traditions that had come before them, to bring those traditions together and to harvest their scholarship for the advancement of learning.

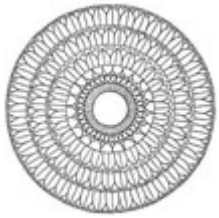
The Barmakids soon became celebrated for their generosity to scholars, writers, artists, poets and singers. Khalid is said to have given a poet 10,000 dinars for writing a single eulogy; one poet praises his 'deep wisdom, his energy, his learning and his forcefulness'. Another called him 'generous, true to his word, pious, humane, firm and clever'.[53] The Barmakids were also genuine polymaths and their gaze extended west as well as east. To supplement the translations that they had commissioned from Sanskrit, they began to commission translations from Greek, bringing Euclid's *Elements* and Galen's *On the Natural Faculties* into Arabic for the first time, as well as works by Hippocrates, Aristotle and Dioscorides.[54] In this way they made available to inquisitive scholars in Baghdad the most important western classical works of maths, geometry and astronomy, seeding what would soon turn into a great flowering of scholarship.

The Caliph shared his Vizier's passion. According to the fourteenth-century polymath Ibn Khaldun, in order to get his hands on the manuscript of Euclid, al-Mansur wrote personally to the Byzantine Emperor, who sent it to him along with some ancient Greek works of physics: 'It was the first Greek work to be translated within the Islamic world during the days of al-Mansur.'[55] An embassy to Constantinople led by the Caliph's personal librarian soon afterwards harvested works of Aristotle on metaphysics and natural sciences, as well as the medical works of Galen and Hippocrates.[56] A little later, a copy of Ptolemy's astronomical masterpiece the *Almagest* was made one of the requirements for the signing of a truce and peace treaty sought by the Byzantines after a border clash.[57]

According to the later Arab jurist and historian of science, Said al-Andalusi, 'There was a surge in spirit and an awakening of intelligence. The first of this dynasty to cultivate science was the second Caliph, al-Mansur … He was very interested in philosophy and observational astronomy. He was fond of both, and of the people who worked in these fields.' In the years that followed, medical, philosophical, astronomical and mathematical texts were translated from Greek, Syriac, Persian and Sanskrit, all in a great flurry of intellectual excitement that also reflected the injunction of the Prophet, as recorded in a Hadith, to 'seek knowledge, even unto China'.[58] This was also 'the first great age of Arabic cookery writing'.[59]

To accommodate the vast scale of the work needed to translate, copy, study and store the volumes of Sanskrit, Aramaic, Hebrew, Persian, Armenian and Greek texts that were being accumulated in Baghdad, al-Mansur, his grandson al-Mamnun and his great-grandson Harun al-Rashid all generously patronised a royal library and astronomical observatory modelled on those of the great Persian kings. In time the institution became known in Arabic as the Bayt al-Hikma, or the 'House of Wisdom' or sometimes the 'Treasury of the Books of Wisdom'.[60] It eventually came to rival Nalanda as the largest library of the early medieval world.[61]

It comprised a translation bureau, a library, a room where scribes copied out manuscripts and an academy of scholars gathered from across the empire.[62] Baghdadis were said to have taken great pride in all this: 'The works of Indians are rendered [into Arabic], the wisdom of the Greeks is translated, and the literature of the Persians has been transferred [to us too]. As a result some works have increased in beauty.'[63]



Despite his conversion to Islam, and his place at the centre of the new Islamic world, Khalid ibn Barmak never forgot his Buddhist roots.

He and his children continued to show a particular interest in collecting Sanskrit manuscripts on subjects ranging from agriculture and alchemy to astronomy and astrology, from pharmacology and mathematics to medicine and architecture.[64] He threw at this passion all the resources that the mighty Abbasid Empire had put at his disposal. In this way Khalid continued the work of translation that had been the mark of his Naw Bahar forebears, but on a much larger scale. The era of Barmakid rule in Baghdad coincided with what some scholars have called 'the Indian phase of early Islam'. In time, the scholars of Baghdad would turn to the Greeks to unlock the secrets of the stars, but initially, under the Barmakids, it was to the astronomers of India, and their Sanskrit treatises, that the Arab astronomers looked for enlightenment. 'They learned from Brahmagupta earlier than Ptolemy,' according to the scholar al-Biruni.

In this, the Abbasids may well have been influenced by the model of the Chinese Tang court, then the major power on the caliphs' eastern border. The Chinese government since the time of the Empress Wu Zetian had endowed Indian scholarship, in particular astronomy, with a particularly high status. It may well have been this that al-Mansur was trying to emulate when he and the Barmakids began inviting to his court Indian intellectuals from around South Asia.[65]

According to a much later account, written in eleventh-century Spain, it was a Jewish emissary whom Khalid first sent to the Hindu holy city of Ujjain. He knew Ujjain to be the centre of Hindu astronomy, and that it was used as the reference point for astronomical measurements, just as the Greenwich Meridian is used today. The emissary invited the Indian scholars back to Baghdad to share their wisdom.

The same Indian delegation from Sindh that brought the *Sindhind* in 733 also included doctors who were

expert in the Indian medical science of Ayurveda. The historian al-Tabari (d.923) mentions that the Caliph's doctors had been unable to suggest a solution to his problems with digestion, and the Caliph, perhaps under Barmakid influence, decided to look instead to Indian medicine for a solution. According to al-Tabari, the Caliph had initially asked the Arab doctors to bring him digestives. They claimed that this would only intensify the illness, and recommended the Caliph eat less. But then a nameless Indian doctor appeared; he confirmed that digestives could indeed aggravate the condition, yet prepared an Ayurvedic drug for the Caliph: a digestive powder with hot spices and medicament to ease his pains. Al-Mansur took it and was subsequently able to digest his food, for which he praised the doctor and the Indian medical systems he represented.[66]

Before long the Barmakids had built a hospital in Baghdad, the Bimaristan al-Barmika, that some maintain formed the blueprint for all future Islamic hospitals. Here Indian medicine and medical organisation were practised, in accordance with the writings of the great Indian physician Charaka, remembered as the father of Ayurveda. The Barmakids also employed several Indian physicians as well as two translators, who were asked to render Charaka's Sanskrit medical works into Arabic, including his celebrated treatise on poisons and their antidotes.[67]

One of these Indian physicians served as supervisor at the hospital and translated medical texts for Khalid's son Yahya.[68] He was assisted by 'Manka the Indian',[69] who worked with Yahya as a personal physician right up to his death. Among the Indian medical texts he translated were Vagbhata's *Compendium on the Heart of the Eight Branches*, along with two other texts originally composed in Kashmir in the mid-seventh century which may well have been among the books studied by the original Barmak when he went to the Valley for his further education.[70]

Yahya inherited all his father's scholarly passions, particularly the interest in Indian medicine. He even sent an emissary over the Indus to Sindh, to speak to doctors and scholars and learn more about Indian medical practice and theory, as well as to collect what information he could about maths and astronomy, cosmology and religion. In particular, the emissary was tasked with collecting Indian medical texts, herbs and pharmaceuticals.

The original report no longer survives but passages from it have been preserved as the *Kitab al-Fihrist*; the book represents some of the first Arabic writing on Indic medicines. It also contains some of the earliest Islamic accounts of Indian philosophy and religion and includes a detailed description of the emissary's visit to a Hindu temple 'where the idols speak to devotees', as well as descriptions of celebrated holy sites such as the Sun Temple in Multan and the great Buddhas of Bamiyan.[71] 'The one who was concerned with the subject of India was Yahya, indeed all the Barmakids showed this obsession and they were continually summoning Indian medical scientists and Indian philosophers,' wrote one Baghdad intellectual.[72]

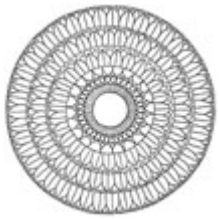
Like his father's, Yahya's interests were diverse: he is known to have commissioned a rendering in Persian verse of the *Life of the Buddha*, as well as translations of the *Stories of Sinbad* and the Indian *Panchatantra* stories which became popular in Arabic as *Kalila wa-Dimnah*.[73] It was through translations like this that, for example, the Buddhist story of the Blind Men trying to describe the Elephant crossed religions to become a Sufi teaching story.[*][74]

It was probably through Yahya's influence that around this time another Indian innovation became popular at the Abbasid court. Chess had been part of the Persian courtly world since, according to Ferdowsi's epic poem *The Shahnameh*, an emissary from Xuanzang's patron King Harsha of Kannauj challenged the intellectuals of Sasanian Persia to a game. Whether the story is true or not, chess was in origin an Indian game, initially known as *caturanga*, its name being a reference to the 'four limbs' of an Indian army – soldiers, cavalry, chariots and elephants. It became popular in Persia and Mesopotamia as *shatranj*, with slightly altered rules and pieces. Many of the pieces are still known in the west today by their Persian names, such as the rook, which derives from the Persian word *rukh*, meaning chariot. Likewise, the cry 'checkmate!' is actually the Persian Arabic *Shah Maat*, literally 'the King is Dead'.

It may well have been through the Barmakids that chess became fashionable in the Abbasid court, where the young Harun al-Rashid was said to be a particular enthusiast.[75] For Harun's tutor, who may have been the source of this interest, was none other than Yahya al-Barmak. At his pupil's accession to the throne in 786, Yahya succeeded his father Khalid as the principal administrator of the whole Abbasid Empire.

He had almost total administrative control for eighteen years, assisted by his two shrewd sons, Ja'far and Fadl, who sat at his side during public audiences: 'The days of their rule, so it is said,' wrote Masudi, 'were like a perpetual wedding feast, filled with unending happiness and joy.'[76]

When Yahya eventually retired, his son Ja‘far al-Barmak in turn took his place.



Just as Khalid ibn Barmak had been the youthful best friend of the future Caliph al-Mansur, so Ja‘far was the inseparable best friend of Harun al-Rashid.

The *Arabian Nights* is full of stories of the nocturnal adventures and youthful misbehaviour of the pair as they roamed in disguise carousing around the bars and fleshpots and back alleys of Baghdad, discussing poetry and music, sampling the best food and wine the empire could provide.[77] They had what one historian has described as ‘a very close, almost erotic friendship’.[78] The exceptionally good-looking Ja‘far was reputed to be a leader of Baghdadi fashion, always most elegantly and sharply dressed, and is said to have invented the fashion for high collars to enhance the beauty of his long neck. (Ja‘far is still very much the snappy dresser in his cartoon avatar in Disney’s *Aladdin*, where he is turned into the smoothest of villains.)

Ja‘far had palaces dotted around Baghdad and estates across Mesopotamia, Persia and Khorasan, so many indeed that ‘rich as Ja‘far’ became a common term during his tenure; one of his residences in Baghdad alone cost him twenty million gold pieces.[79] But, although extravagant, he was a brilliant administrator and jurist, a gifted calligrapher and musician, and a connoisseur of singers and poets, with a taste for tales and fables, especially those from India. And like the other Barmakids he continued to patronise the translation of Sanskrit science and philosophy.

Ja‘far was the fourth generation of the Barmakids to work intimately with their milk brothers, the Abbasid caliphs. The tradition of mutual suckling continued to the end: Harun’s baby son nuzzled the breast of Ja‘far’s wife, and a daughter of Ja‘far was nursed by Zubeida, the Caliph’s wife. But there was to be no fifth generation.

In 802–3, for reasons that are still unclear, there was a gradual estrangement between the Caliph and the Vizier. Harun al-Rashid became irritated with his former best friend and began to resent his dependence on all the different branches of Barmakids.[80] Eventually he decided not only to crush his overmighty friend but to destroy once and for all the power of the Vizier’s entire family.

Later historians tried to explain his actions by gossiping about Ja‘far having a liaison with Harun’s beautiful sister Abbasah; in one version of the story the two are even said to have had a secret love child who was sent off to Mecca to make sure no one heard about the scandalous liaison.[81] Others blamed the fall of the Barmakids on the envy and malevolence of Harun al-Rashid’s much admired and somewhat formidable wife, Zubeida. But the dramatic events which ended the career of the Barmakids clearly came as a complete surprise to contemporaries and the reasons remain mysterious to this day.[82]

There were no signs in advance of what was coming, and the coup took place overnight and without warning. Ja‘far himself was murdered on the very night of the coup, beheaded by Harun’s personal bodyguard. Initially the bodyguard could not believe his orders and went to Ja‘far to ask what to do.

Yasir went to the house of Ja‘far, whom he found occupied with his pleasures, and he said to him:

‘The Commander of the Faithful has ordered me to bring him your head.’

‘The Commander of the Faithful’, said Ja‘far, ‘likes to tease me. This is no doubt one of his jokes.’

‘By God,’ replied the officer, ‘I have never seen him more serious.’

‘If it isn’t a joke, then he was drunk.’

‘No, by God, he seemed fully in possession of his reason, and from the prayers I have seen him perform, I cannot believe that he has drunk anything today.’

Ja‘far continued: ‘If ever I have done you some service, there will never be any better occasion for you to recognize it than now.’

‘I am completely at your service, for anything that is not against the will of the Commander of the Faithful.’

‘Go back to him,’ said Ja‘far, ‘and tell him that you have carried out his orders. If he shows regret, I

shall owe you my life and you may count on new favours from me. If, on the other hand, his decision remains constant, tomorrow you will perform your duty.'

The officer answered that this was not possible.

Ja'far said: 'Then I will accompany you to the Commander of the Faithful, and I will place myself so as to hear his words and your reply. If, after you have exhausted all excuses, he will still not be satisfied with anything but my head, you will come at once and accomplish your mission.'

'I agree to that,' replied Yasir. They went, therefore, to Rashid's camp. Yasir went in to the Caliph and said to him:

'I have brought the head, O Commander of the Faithful, and it is here.'

'Bring it at once, motherfucker!' cried Rashid, 'or at once yours shall fall!'[83]

Ja'far now knew what his fate was. He asked Yasir for permission to go home and make a will and free all his slaves. But messengers kept coming from the Caliph asking if the deed had been done, and Yasir was becoming nervous.[84] 'Now do as you have been ordered,' said Ja'far.

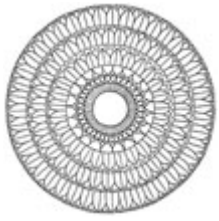
Then, drawing a small kerchief from his sleeve he bandaged his eyes and stretched out his neck. Yasir cut off his head and took it in to Rashid and placed it before him. The Caliph approached it and began to enumerate all of Ja'far's sins. Then Rashid said: 'O Yasir, bring me so-and-so.'

When they arrived, he said: 'Cut off Yasir's head, I cannot bear the sight of the murderer of Ja'far!'[85]

But the bloodshed did not end there. Ja'far's body, after being divided into three parts, was gibbeted on stakes set up in the middle of each of the three bridges over the Tigris. The retired former Vizier Yahya, once Harun's tutor and now an old man, and Ja'far's brother Fadl, were both arrested and jailed, and they later died in prison after being tortured to reveal the hidden place of their fortune. The family's property and slaves all passed into the possession of Zubeida.[86]

No one dared show their feelings, and it was left to the poets to write their eulogies to their dead patrons in secret:

See how the Barmakid Blade of Indian steel has been struck
By the steel of the Hashimites!
The stars of generosity are out;
The hand of benevolence is closed.
The seas of bounty have ebbed away
Now that the Barmakids are gone.
Fate has betrayed the sons of Barmak,
Did Yahya not govern the whole earth?
Yet he woke to find himself beneath it.[87]



After the fall of the Barmakids, Arab intellectuals focused more on retrieving ancient Greek learning than on recovering that of either India or Persia. Perhaps too closely associated with the fallen viziers, the search for new learning from India gave way to the study of the Greek classics.

But the Indian manuscripts lying in the House of Wisdom had one remarkable champion. This was the philosopher and mathematician Muhammad ibn Musa Khwarizmi (780–850), who was also from Persian-speaking Central Asia; his family may possibly, like the Barmakids, have come from an educated Buddhist background too, but were more probably of Zoroastrian stock; indeed one source calls him al-Majusi, implying that his family were magi, the holy men of the Zoroastrian religion. These Persian priests were known to be fine astronomers, as their appearance chasing the Star of Bethlehem in the Gospel story of Jesus' birth bears witness.

Either way, Khwarizmi was brought up in an oasis town in the deserts of Khwarazm, east of the Caspian

and north-west of Samarkand, in an area that was culturally Persian but also deeply influenced by Indian art, religion and culture. He certainly seems to have been familiar with Indian mathematics before he arrived in Baghdad, and he may first have encountered the techniques among the Buddhists of Merv.[88]

Khwarizmi was invited to Baghdad in 817, around fifteen years after the fall of the Barmakids, and was offered the post of head astronomer at the House of Wisdom. Based in the great academy, with full access to all the translations that the Barmakids had commissioned, it was he who dived deepest and with most dazzling effect into the treasury of manuscripts collected in the Bayt al-Hikma.[89]

After studying and analysing the Indian Sanskrit texts on science, mathematics and astronomy, particularly that of Brahmagupta, he became increasingly delighted by the simplicity of the Indian mathematical system. He first translated the subtle and complex mathematical verse of Aryabhata into clear Arabic prose, and then began laying out the same ideas with far greater precision than had been achieved in either the obscure Sanskrit verse of the original or the complex Arabic of al-Fazari.

'We have decided to explain Indian calculating techniques,' he told his readers, 'using the nine characters. We will show how, because of their simplicity and conciseness, these characters are capable of expressing any number.' Khwarizmi's most famous book was *The Compendious Book of Calculating by Completion and Balancing, According to Hindu Calculation*. The book, popularly known as *Kitab al-Jabr*, was a landmark in the history of mathematics, and established algebra as an independent discipline in the Islamic world: indeed, the English word algebra derives from its title.[90]

Khwarizmi's major contribution was to combine Euclid's theories with Indian mathematics. The sheer clarity of his writing, and the simple way he managed to explain complex ideas, inspired generations of subsequent mathematicians and initiated rapid developments in algebra, geometry and trigonometry across the Islamic world: Indian innovations such as linear and quadratic equations, geometrical solutions, tables of sines, tangents and co-tangents suddenly became accessible to all.

Most important of all, he taught the Arabs with remarkable clarity and simplicity of language the importance of the idea of zero, providing the first simple, detailed and comprehensible explanation of the positional principle of decimal notation, the Indian origin of the nine number symbols, as well as 'the tenth figure in the shape of the circle, to prevent confusion over the position of the figures'.[91] Khwarizmi also gave his name to an Indian idea that he first made accessible to the west: the algorithm. From Baghdad, these ideas spread across the breadth of the Arab and Islamic world.

Within a generation, Khwarizmi's writings were eagerly read, copied and developed particularly in the great emerging intellectual centres on the edge of Christian Europe, Córdoba and Toledo, at the far western edge of the Arab world in the lands the Arabs knew as al-Andalus.

By 1068, just as William the Conqueror was completing his occupation of Anglo-Saxon England, Said al-Andalusi, the Qadi or Chief Justice of Toledo, was writing an early global study of the history of science which focused on the debt the Arabs owed to the thinkers of South Asia. It is one of the most important contemporary statements of the power of Indian ideas and the prestige of the Indosphere in the medieval Arab world: 'The first nation to have cultivated science is India,' he wrote.

> This is a powerful nation, having a large population and a rich kingdom. India is known for the wisdom of its people. Over many centuries, all the kings of the past have recognised the ability of the Indians in all the branches of knowledge.
>
> The Indians, as known to all nations for many centuries, are the essence of wisdom, the source of fairness and objectivity. They are peoples of sublime pensiveness, and useful and rare inventions. In spite of the fact that their colour is in the first stage of blackness, Allah, in His glory, did not give them the low characters, the poor manners, or the inferior principles associated with this group and ranked them above the white and brown peoples …
>
> To their credit, the Indians have made great strides in the study of numbers and of geometry. They have acquired immense information and reached the zenith in their knowledge of the movements of the stars [astronomy] and the secrets of the skies [astrology] as well as other mathematical studies. After all that, they have surpassed all the other peoples in their knowledge of medical science and the strengths of various drugs, the characteristics of compounds, and the peculiarities of substances … As to theology, they are in agreement as to the unity of God …

He goes on to praise two final innovations of which he was particularly fond:

> That which has reached us from their work on numbers is *Hisāb al-Ghubār* [dustboard arithmetic, using an abacus and figures scribbled in dust or sand], which was simplified by Khwarizmi. This method of calculating is the simplest, fastest, and easiest method to understand and use and has a remarkable structure. It is a testimony to the intelligence of the Indians, the clarity of their creativity, and the power of their inventiveness.
>
> That which has reached us from the discoveries of their clear thinking and the marvels of their inventions is [the game of] chess. The Indians have, in the construction of its cells, its double numbers, its symbols and secrets, reached the forefront of knowledge. They have extracted its mysteries from supernatural forces. While the game is being played and its pieces are being manoeuvred, the beauty of structure and greatness of harmony appear. It demonstrates the manifestation of high intentions and noble deeds, as it provides various forms of warnings from enemies and points out ruses as well as ways to avoid dangers. And in this there is considerable gain and profit.[92]

It was when first Toledo and then the rest of Spain fell to the Christian Reconquista at the end of the eleventh century, and the libraries of al-Andalus began to be accessed by scholars from the north, that these brilliant Indian ideas first made their way into Christian Europe. There they changed for ever not just ways of doing business and accounting, but ways of thinking about numbers and time, as well as physics and metaphysics.

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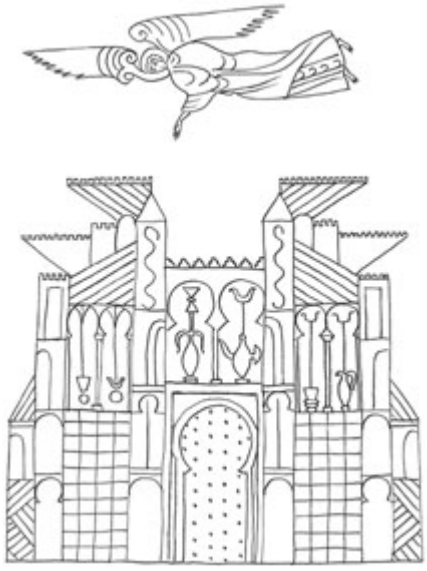
* 'There was once a city of the blind. One day the news came that an elephant was passing outside the city, so the townsfolk decided to send a delegation to report back as to what an elephant was. Three men left and stumbled forwards until they found the beast. They felt the animal and headed back to report. The first man said: "An elephant is like a vast snake!" The second man was indignant at hearing this: "What nonsense!" he said. "I felt the elephant and what it most resembles is a huge pillar." The third man shook his head and said: "Both these men are liars! I felt the elephant and it resembles a broad, flat fan." All three men stuck by their stories and for the rest of their lives refused to speak to each other. Each professed that they and only they knew the truth.

'Of course all three blind men had a measure of insight. The first felt the trunk of the elephant, the second the leg, the third the ear, but not one had begun to grasp the totality or the greatness of the beast. If only they had listened to one another, they might have grasped the true nature of the beast. But they were too proud and preferred to keep to their own half-truths. "So it is with us," say the Sufis. "We see the Almighty one way, the Jews have a slightly different conception and the Christians a third. To us, all our different visions are irreconcilable. But what we forget is that before God we are like blind men stumbling around in total darkness …"'



Fruits of the Science of Numbers

10

On an early summer's day in 1085, the Christian King Alfonso VI of León crossed the Tagus river over the old Roman Alcantara Bridge. He marched his troops in triumph through the ancient Visigothic Puerta de Vasagra and up the steep, narrow lanes of Toledo. By his side was his remarkable general, Rodrigo Diaz, known as El Cid, Arabic for the Leader. Here, near the top of the city, stood the great Jama Masjid. What had once been the ancient Visigothic capital of Christian Spain before the arrival of the Arabs in 711 ce was now the first major city of al-Andalus to be lost by them. This was later regarded as the first major victory of the Reconquista, the Christian reconquest of Spain from the armies of Islam.

The city had opened its gates to Alfonso and invited him to rule following an extended period of civil war. It was, after all, a city the king knew well, and once, during a period of adversity in his youth, he had lived happily here for a few months when exiled from home by his brother. But the last Muslim ruler of Toledo, Emir al-Qadir, had proved himself feckless and ineffective, and now the situations were reversed. Finding his authority slipping, al-Qadir fled the city and appealed urgently for help from Alfonso, who became his Castilian military 'protector'. As the Emirate disintegrated and as al-Qadir began to look more and more like a Castilian puppet, Alfonso found himself drawn deeper into the politics of Toledo, first as a buttress to shore up the Emir's crumbling authority, then, increasingly, as the de facto ruler. Eventually al-Qadir made a deal with Alphonso. If the Christian king would install him in a principality in Valencia, then Alphonso was welcome to Toledo.

On 25 May 1085, after seven years of waiting for the right moment, Alphonso finally made his move. The threat of a long siege followed by bloody conquest was balanced by bribery of the city's elite and the offer of generous concessions to the city's mainly Muslim population. As long as they paid their taxes, they were promised that life would continue as before, and there would be security for all persons and their property. The principal Friday mosque was to continue in Muslim hands. Alfonso declared himself the 'King of Two Religions', and the city remained as bilingual as it had been before, speaking in addition to Arabic a Romance dialect that was a precursor of Spanish. Just as the Church authorities had once overseen justice for the city's Christian minority, so now the Qazi, or Chief Judge, would administer Islamic law to his people, even if the ruler was now to be a Christian.[1]

So when the new King and the Cid rode in, no fighting took place and no blood was shed. After 370 years

as an Islamic capital, the city was to revert to Christian rule, but the city's non-Christian inhabitants – Muslim and Jewish – were allowed to stay, and to keep all their possessions and privileges. Alfonso's court, though consciously Christian, remained saturated with Islamic culture and learning.[2] The gradual and peaceful way that the Castilians took over meant that at the time the fall of the city was hardly referred to by Christian chroniclers; indeed, they do not even agree on the date. But the Arabs realised its significance. In the songs of al-Andalus, the Fall of Toledo was remembered as an immense tragedy and the harbinger of much worse to come for the Arabs of Spain. The poets and singers were not wrong.[3]

Before its reconquest, Toledo had long been ruled by the learned and cultured Banu Nun dynasty. Their Qazi, Said al-Andalusi (1029–70), was an eminent historian of science. It was he who had written so movingly, and so enthusiastically, about the contribution of the Indians to mathematics and astronomy, based on the texts in his own possession in the vast, scholarly library he had amassed in Toledo. This library, in turn, had drawn on a great revival of scholarship, mathematics and especially astronomy which had taken place in al-Andalus as recently as the Qazi's childhood.

In his *Book of the Categories of the Nations*, Said al-Andalusi writes with particular warmth about a scholar named Maslama al-Majriti (that is, from Madrid, then a small town north of Toledo). Maslama was 'the chief mathematician in al-Andalus during his time and better than all the astronomers who came before him … He left behind an excellent group of students … He also wrote a book, titled *Fruits of the Science of Numbers*, explaining the "mathematics of business transactions".'[4]

Maslama focused much of his studies on the astronomical works that Khwarizmi had adapted from Sanskrit texts in the Baghdad House of Wisdom, among them the celebrated star tables known as the *Zij al-Sindhind*. In 978 ce he produced an updated version of Khwarizmi's 116 Indian-derived star tables plotting the movement of the sun, the moon and the five visible planets.[5] He also devoted much time to the study of the *Almagest* and the *Planispherium*, both by Ptolemy. All these works had been imported from Baghdad and the eastern part of the Islamic world to Spain. Maslama had many of these texts systematically copied out, studied and updated. Said, in turn, brought the pick of them to Toledo just before his own death in 1070.[6]

Although both Maslama and Said were dead by 1085 when Alfonso took over Toledo, Said's brilliant assistant and collaborator was still alive, albeit now an old man. This was Ibrahim al-Zarqali, 'the Engraver', so called for his work producing some of the greatest astrolabes ever made in Europe. He was also known as 'the little blue-eyed one'. For many years he had made for the Qazi complex scientific instruments for conducting astronomical observations, including marble water clocks of extraordinary accuracy and the *saphaea*, a revolutionary 'universal' astrolabe whose design was later copied all over Christendom. Al-Zarqali was also a renowned astronomer in his own right; his star charts, the *Toledan Tables*, were much admired and studied.[7]

Mentioned by an admiring Chaucer and honoured more recently by having a crater on the moon named after him, al-Zarqali chose, like many of the city's Muslim elite, to move south to Córdoba at the conquest of Toledo. He took with him his astronomical instruments, said to be the finest in the Islamic world. But most of Said's manuscripts, along with the library of the Banu Nun, were by force of circumstances left behind, including the choicest fruits of Maslama's astronomical studies and voracious bibliophilia. These now fell into the hands of hungry scholars from around western Christendom.[8]

The unique circumstance of the capture of Toledo, which left its buildings, treasures and libraries almost completely intact, meant that the city rapidly became the major centre from which Islamic culture and civilisation began to diffuse both northwards and further westwards. Quantities of artwork from al-Andalus – ivory caskets, Persian silks, intricate metal incense burners, fine pottery and tilework – were sent by Alfonso to the great Benedictine abbey of Cluny in Burgundy, then at the peak of its influence. The proceeds from the sale of some of these art objects paid for about half of the vast new abbey church, known to art historians as Cluny III. Those objects that they decided to keep in the Cluny treasury brought into the abbey's artistic vocabulary many of the Islamic motifs that subsequently turned up in the beautifully complex and intricately sculpted capitals and tympanums that began from this point to decorate the Cluniac abbeys lining the pilgrimage roads to Santiago. The great portal at the Abbey of Moissac in Burgundy, for example, was sculpted in the aftermath of the Fall of Toledo. Its startling vision of the court of Christ presiding over the Apocalypse more closely resembles those of the Sasanian shahs or the Abbasid Caliph enthroned in Baghdad than it does any court in Christian Europe. The twisted, biting, self-devouring beasts and complex spirals of paired and cross-mounted Persian lions filling the arabesque medallions on the scalloped *trumeau* derive from eastern silks and ivories, while the figures of the Elders of the Apocalypse

playing lutes and viols are really Persian musicians on their ouds and kamancheh spike fiddles, mysteriously transported from some Sasanian silverware, Kashan tiles or a gorgeous Persian ceramic, rapidly baptised and brought into the service of this Cluniac Christ.

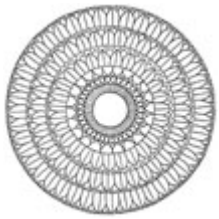
One of the Moissac capitals has a Kufic border; in the Cathedral of Le Puy, built around the same time, there is another Kufic inscription on a pair of wooden doorways; nearby rise multifoil lobed and cusped arches and Moorish masonry voussoirs of alternating red and white, closely resembling those of the Great Mosque at Córdoba and whose ultimate architectural origins probably lie in the polychrome cusps of early Hindu temples in Kashmir. Several of the capitals in the cloister of the great Spanish Cluniac monastery of Santo Domingo de Silos are clearly Moorish in style, and sometimes seem to be Seljuk in their decorative vocabulary. Another Romanesque church just over the Spanish border at Atienza has a mysterious Kufic inscription reading *al-Mulk lillah*, 'the Kingdom Belongs to God'.[9] The Green Man, with vines emerging from his mouth, another staple of Romanesque art, also arrived in Europe at this time, ultimately deriving from the Hindu *kirtimukha* mask heads of Indian temples, transmitted westwards by Arab sculptors.[10]

The concessions promised by Alfonso to the Muslims of Toledo did not hold for long. Alfonso's envoy to the city, a sympathetic local man named Sisnando, was quickly replaced by Alfonso's Burgundian Queen, Constance, and her confessor, the Cluniac monk Bernard of Sahagún. Neither of them showed any liking for the Muslims who had remained, and Bernard later proved such a violently over-enthusiastic Crusader against the Islamic world that, uniquely, he was sent back to his cathedral by Pope Urban II.[11] On his appointment as archbishop of Toledo, Bernard promptly seized the mosque, set up altars, raised bells in the minaret and turned it into the cathedral.[12] But he did nothing to destroy, or limit access to, the great treasury of Arabic manuscripts that his new cathedral now held in its library. Soon after the first translation of the Qu'ran into Latin was made by Cluniac monks from a Spanish manuscript in the Toledo library.[13]

The influence of the treasures of Toledo had a dramatic effect on the courts and nascent colleges of Europe. The Toledo Academy established by a later king, Alfonso X, 'the Wise' (1221–84), quickly attracted students from all parts of Christendom, including England and Scotland. On arrival, they were quite simply staggered by the wealth of learning they found there.

In this period a western scholar like Bernard of Chartres was proud to own twenty-four books, and the Abbey of Cluny had a few hundred, but at the same time the library of Córdoba contained 400,000 manuscripts, much the largest in Europe, while Baghdad had as many as thirty-six public libraries and over a hundred booksellers. Even a relatively provincial steppe city like Merv, now in deepest Turkmenistan, had dozens of book dealers and well-attended auctions of books and manuscripts, alluring enough to propel the Middle Eastern scholar Yaqut halfway across Eurasia to search its book stacks.[14]

A small portion of this richness now became available to northern Europeans. Before long a series of works, including translations of Euclid and Ptolemy of Alexandria, unknown in the west since the Fall of Rome in the fifth century, began to filter out of the scholarly bridgehead of Toledo, as donkeys and pack horses carried the newly translated codexes over the Pyrenees and north towards the new universities of Europe. Among them came volumes of Khwarizmi's reworkings of Indian mathematical texts.



Some time in the early 1140s a scholarly monk from the monastery of Bobbio in north Italy made an arduous crossing of the Alps and the Pyrenees and eventually arrived footsore at the gates of Toledo. Bobbio was renowned for having the most important scientific library in western Christendom, which was the model for the monastic library in Umberto Eco's *Name of the Rose*, but even Bobbio did not have the texts the monk was looking for.

In Toledo, Gerard of Cremona (1114–87) was given the position of canon at the new cathedral. Despite the betrayal of the promises made at the city's fall, many of the Muslims of the city had still chosen to stay on under Castilian rule, indeed the city was probably majority Muslim for another half century. Among them was a scholar named Ghalib 'the Mozarab'. It is not known how Gerard and Ghalib met and became friends, but soon after Gerard's arrival the two began to cooperate on a series of translations from Toledo's

Arabic library.[15]

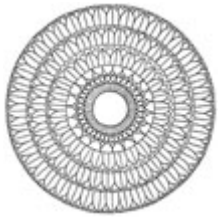
Gerard and Ghalib's mode of translation was not one that would be regarded as ideal by modern scholars: according to the Englishman Daniel of Morley, who continued Gerard's work after the Italian's death, Ghalib rendered the classical Arabic of the texts into Castilian Spanish, which Gerard then translated on into Latin. As many of the texts were Sanskrit and Greek classics which had themselves arrived in Arabic via Syriac or Persian there was much room for error. But the system seems to have worked.

Over the next half-century, Ghalib and Gerard translated no fewer than eighty-eight works of astronomy, mathematics, medicine, philosophy and logic, the very branches of learning which underpinned the great revival of scholarship in Europe referred to as the Twelfth-Century Renaissance.[16] They focused especially on translating the greatest works of the Greek scientists of antiquity, particularly Ptolemy and Aristotle, but they also worked to bring original Indian and Arab works into Latin. Among these was Khwarizmi's *Book of Addition and Subtraction According to the Hindu Calculation*, and the book which went on to define algebra for Europeans, the *Kitab al-Jabr*.[17]

Subsequent generations of scholars looked to Gerard as the model of the dedicated but modest scholar, working away without reward to pass the flame of learning onward. 'For although Gerard spurned the glory of fame,' wrote one of his students,

> and although he fled fawning praises and the empty pomp of this world … nevertheless the fruit of his works diffused through the centuries. From his very cradle he had been educated in the lap of philosophy and had arrived at the knowledge of each part of it according to the study of the Latins. Nevertheless, because of his love for [Ptolemy's] *Almagest*, which he did not find at all amongst the Latins, he made his way to Toledo. Here, seeing an abundance of books in Arabic on every subject, and pitying the poverty he had experienced amongst the Latins concerning these subjects, out of a desire to translate, he thoroughly learned the Arabic language.
>
> In this way, expert both in Arabic and the subject matter he was dealing with, he read through the voluminous writings of the Arabs. He did not cease this labour and until the end of his life he transmitted into Latin, as if to a beloved heir, in as plain and intelligible a way as was possible, a series of books on many subjects, whatever he esteemed as the most choice. He finally went the way of the flesh in the seventy-third year of his life, in the year of our lord 1187.[18]

After Gerard's death his English pupil Daniel of Morley included some of his works among the 'precious multitude of books' that he carried back to England, and that eventually ended up in the libraries of the fledgling University of Oxford.[19]



Gerard and Ghalib were the most prolific and productive stars of the new translation movement, but they were not alone, nor were they the first. Other translations from the Arabic at this period were being made in many other places where Arab rule had given way to that of Crusading Christians: south Italy, Sicily and the various Crusader states of Outremer that by the late eleventh century were now lining the Mediterranean coast from Antioch (now in south-east Turkey) to Gaza (in Palestine).

Together, these filled European libraries with a richness of learning impossible even to imagine a century earlier: editions of Aristotle, Euclid, Plato, Ptolemy, commentaries by the great Persian polymath Ibn Sina (987–1038, known as Avicenna in the west) and his Andalucian counterpart Ibn Rushd (1126–98, known as Averroes); as well as encyclopaedias of astronomy and astrology, guides to precious stones and their qualities, and, most electrifying of all, a bundle of astronomical and astrological texts by Khwarizmi. It took nearly 300 years, but the intellectual treasures gathered by the Barmakids in the House of Wisdom in Baghdad had finally made their way to the extremities of western Europe.

By the end of the eleventh century, the Spanish Christian Reconquista of al-Andalus was well under way, and the westward frontier of the Islamic world was in retreat. As a patchwork of small Christian kingdoms

began to be established south of the Pyrenees, many Spanish (or 'Mozarab') Christians educated in Córdoba, Toledo and Granada began emigrating into the Christian bridgeheads in northern Spain, bringing with them many of the luxuries and discoveries that the Arabs had introduced: lemons, Seville oranges and sugar cane, as well as cotton and mulberries for silk farming. They also built sophisticated gardens and the irrigation systems for their sustenance.

Among the innovations they brought with them was the Indo-Arabic number system, those digits whose initial forms had first been developed in India under Ashoka and which had now passed around the Islamic world in numerals that had slightly changed under Arab influence. These quickly caught on among the more inquisitive scholars in the north of Spain.

Already, around a century before the Fall of Toledo, in 976 the monk Vigila from the Asturian monastery of Albelda in the Rioja began work on a text now known as the *Codex Vigilanus*. This is widely accepted as the oldest dated Latin manuscript containing the Indo-Arabic numerals: 'We must know that the Indians have a most subtle talent,' wrote Vigila, 'and all other races yield to them in arithmetic and geometry and the other liberal arts. And this is clear in the 9 figures with which they can designate each and every degree of each order of numbers'.[20]

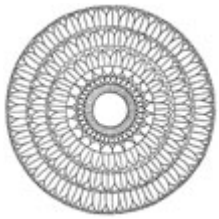
Among the European wandering scholars who ventured to al-Andalus at this period was a French mathematician, Gerbert of Aurillac (945–1003). Gerbert was a young monk from the highlands of central France who, like Gerard, had chosen to join the scholarly brotherhood of the monastery of Bobbio. In 967 he travelled to the monastery of Ripoll in Catalonia, inland from Barcelona, where he studied Indo-Arabic mathematics and astronomy for three years under Hatto, Bishop of Vich; Hatto had earlier travelled to Córdoba, in the heart of al-Andalus, to meet the Caliph, and had returned besotted with the sophistication of Andalusian Arab culture. The Ripoll monastic library still contains many early Islamic astronomical texts.[21]

It was here at Ripoll that Gerbert learned the western, or Maghrebi, form of Indo-Arabic digits, from which our modern western numerals derive; the eastern forms of the same Indian digits took their own path and ultimately produced the numerals used today in the Arab world.[22] These western-form numbers Gerbert employed to signify the different values of the counters on an abacus he had designed, though it seems that at this early stage it was without the numeral zero.[23] He then returned over the Pyrenees bringing his new abacus with him and used it to teach mathematics at the cathedral school in Rheims. Here he helped establish the *quadrivium*, a new curriculum which began introducing the Indo-Arabic decimal numbers to scholarly circles in northern Europe.[24]

From Rheims he continued to write on arithmetic, geometry, music and sundials, and in his spare time pioneered the construction of celestial spheres for teaching the positions of the stars and planets. He sustained a scholarly correspondence with his old friends over the Pyrenees in Spain, writing in 984 in an attempt to find a work entitled *De Astrologia* and a second work by one Joseph Hispanus 'about the multiplication and division of numbers … You know with what zeal I am everywhere collecting copies of books.'[25] He later returned to Bobbio as abbot, and letters survive from him excitedly telling his friends that he had recently discovered eight volumes of Boethius' *De Astrologia* in the library as well as 'some beautiful figures of geometry'.[26]

Gerbert's technical innovations utilised the new ideas coming out of Spain, such as an improved decimal abacus board, the astrolabe and various other astrological instruments such as armillary spheres used for observing and analysing the heavens. As word of his brilliance spread, Gerbert was made tutor to the young Emperor Otto III and appointed first bishop of Rheims, then archbishop of Ravenna. In 999, Otto used his influence to have Gerbert crowned pope, under the name Sylvester II. But even here suspicions of Islam clouded his reputation; it began to be rumoured that he had studied magic by apprenticing himself to a Muslim sorcerer and had escaped by stealing a grimoire of spells from his master.

Others maintained that he was in league with a female demon, or alternatively with the Devil himself, who had allegedly carried him down to hell and back. Even the normally sober and sensible William of Malmesbury, sitting in his damp Wiltshire study, subscribed to the view that Gerbert had agreed to be under the Devil's dominion for ever. 'Gerbert surpassed Ptolemy with the astrolabe,' he conceded, but in Spain he learned 'dangerous Saracen magic … There he learnt what the singing and the flight of birds portended, and acquired the art of calling up spirits from hell.'[27]



Two hundred years later, among the more improbable pioneers bringing Indo-Islamic learning to Christian Europe was a lone Scot, probably from Melrose in the Borders. Like Gerbert, Michael Scot (1175–1232) is remembered in his native land – and in the pages of Sir Walter Scott – as a powerful wizard, but he was really a pioneering mathematician and scientist.* From the Scottish Borders he travelled to Paris and thence to Rome, where he became tutor to a later pope. After a long stay at Bologna, he went on to Toledo in 1220, where he acquired fluent Arabic. Scot soon began to dress in Arab clothes and developed a passion for esoteric eastern literature.[28]

His language skills opened up to him the Arabic versions of Aristotle, and also brought him into contact with original works by Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd. As well as mathematics and medicine, Scot had a deep interest in Arabic literature about the occult: not just astronomy, astrology and alchemy but also, so it was alleged, sorcery. He spent twenty years in Toledo translating the works of Ibn Sina, including his magisterial *Canon of Medicine*, which later triggered a European medical revolution. He then made his way to Sicily to work on Arabic texts at the court of another monarch running a kingdom vibrant with a rich Arab culture, Frederick II of Sicily (1194–1250).[29]

The third star of the translation movement was the much travelled Adelard of Bath (c.1080–1142), sometimes called the First English Scientist. Adelard was born in Bath, and was probably of Anglo-Saxon stock on his mother's side, but was part of the extended family of Bishop Guiso of Wells, who came to Somerset from Lorraine.[30] He was an ambitious, adventurous, colourful character, celebrated for his dandyish dressing in a green cloak, a lapis-blue shirt and a cap striped with red and bordered with ermine; he also sported a dazzling emerald ring. He hunted with a hawk and was famous for the sweetness of his playing on the lute. His unusually lively prose was laced with jokes, puns and anecdotes.[31]

He first travelled to France around 1105, but he found French intellectuals offputtingly pretentious, merely 'making ropes out of intellectual sand'.[32] From there he headed to Sicily, where he sat at the feet of William, Bishop of Syracuse, 'most learned in mathematical arts', to whom he later dedicated a book.[33] Then, around 1107, he took ship from Salerno to Crusader Outremer, where he spent seven years in and around Antioch, mastering Arabic and Arab medicine. By 1114 he was at Mamistra, near Adana in the south-east of Turkey, when the region was shaken by an earthquake 'so that you could hardly be more secure on earth than on water'. The bridge at Misis which Adelard saw shaking still stands.[34]

During these eastern travels Adelard obtained both the Greek and Indo-Islamic books of science, and the knowledge of Arabic which would enable him to translate them. His translation of the Arabic version of Euclid's *Elements* introduced western Christendom to the most important book of geometry ever written, and one which would become the standard teaching text for the next eight centuries.

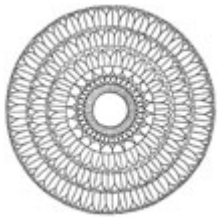
On his return to Somerset, Adelard found himself something of a celebrity and was besieged by friends and curious scholars wishing to hear what he had seen and learned. 'Among those paying their calls was a certain nephew of mine, who, in investigating the causes of things, was tying himself in knots rather than unravelling them. He urged me to put forward a book which would reveal something new from the studies of the Arabs and explain the reason for my troublesome, winding journey … to teachers in different regions.'[35] Adelard agreed to do so.

The result was his *Questions on Natural Science*, a dialogue where the confused nephew poses questions and Adelard answers. 'This is how the causes of things work,' he begins. 'So let us start from the lowest objects and end with the highest.'[36] Adelard also compiled a book on the abacus, a discourse on hunting with falcons and a treatise on the astrolabe written for Prince Henry, later to become King Henry II of England (1154–89), whom he encouraged 'to acquire not only the knowledge in Latin texts but also that which the Arabs have to teach concerning the movement of the spheres and the orbits of the stars'.[37]

Adelard also translated from the Arabic *The Book of Talismans*, practised as astrologer royal and cast horoscopes for Henry and other members of the English royal family. The texts of ten of these predictions survive in the British Library, apparently written out in Adelard's own hand.[38] Meanwhile his translation of

the astronomical tables of Khwarizmi as revised in Spain by Maslama, brought to England the most up-to-date astronomical reference book then existing.

As he sat in Wells in Somerset translating Khwarizmi's books of astronomy and their Indian star charts from Arabic into Latin in 1120, he was still using as his meridian the longitude of a place he calls 'Arin'. This was of course none other than the Guptas' cultural capital, Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh, where the original readings were taken by Brahmagupta, at the peak of the Indian age of astronomical mastery in the seventh century, a full 500 years earlier.[39]



What happened in the Spanish marches at the turn of the millennium was a sometimes forgotten but crucial moment in the development of western civilisation: the revival of medieval European learning by a wholesale transfusion of scholarship from the Indo-Islamic world in a combined operation by Muslim, Jewish and Christian scholars. The importance of this moment, which revolutionised medieval Europe and helped give rise to a renewed culture of science in the west, cannot be exaggerated.

The Romance poetry of the southern Mediterranean, particularly the songs of the troubadours patronised by the kings of Toledo, was heavily influenced by the Hispano-Arab songs and poetry, and indeed by the whole deep mulch of the culture compost of al-Andalus with its hundreds of Arabic legends, tales, proverbs, Sufi anecdotes and wisdom stories. There are reasons to see even some aspects of Dante's *Divine Comedy* as bearing the imprint of these Islamic stories, such as that of Muhammad's Night Journey and an Andalusian tale called *The Bath of Zarieb*.[40]

It was at this time too that the Indian game of chess – warfare telescoped down to a board game – found its way across the frontiers of the Arab–Islamic world into the courtly culture of Mediterranean Europe, where it quickly became the favourite indoor game of the nobility.[41] It is no accident that *The Book of Chess*, the first guide to the art of the game ever written in western Europe, was produced in Toledo during the rule of Alfonso the Wise, and that it contains images of chess players locked in combat, casually revealing the astonishing multiculturalism of the town at this period: among the players illustrated are Muslims, Christians and Jews; Caucasians, Indians and swarthy-looking white-turbanned 'Moors'; men and women; aristocrats and priests, musicians and falconers, and even dancing girls.[42]

It was probably through Islamic Spain that such basic facets of western civilisation as paper, ideas of courtly love, chivalry, algebra, gunpowder, printing and the abacus passed into Europe, while the pointed arch and Graeco-Indo-Arab (or Unani, from the Arabic for Greek/Ionian) medicine arrived via the great medical school of Salerno.

Meanwhile, in Sicily, eyewitnesses, both Christian and Muslim, were amazed by how Sicily's Norman kings maintained a Christian court profoundly influenced by Islamic ways. One Spanish Muslim who was shipwrecked on the Sicilian coast in the twelfth century, Ibn Jubayr of Granada, left a description of what he regarded as a seductively cosmopolitan court, where Muslims interacted with Christians and Jews on a daily basis, at every level. 'The King has many Muslim doctors and astrologers,' he wrote,

> who he covets and takes great care of, to such an extent that when he becomes aware of a Muslim doctor or astrologer traveling through his land, he grants him such a lavish livelihood that he forgets his home.
>
> In immersing himself in the pleasures of the land, in the formation of laws, in the establishment of procedures, and in the majesty of his realm, he resembles the rulers of Muslims.[43]

Of no one was this more true than Roger II, known as the 'Baptised Sultan', who commissioned the Tunisian scholar al-Idrisi to produce an encyclopaedic work of geography. Some of the oldest chess pieces to survive in Europe are the product of his court.[44] The influence of texts translated in Sicily at this time was also important in the development of western medicine, philosophy and even poetry.

Some scholars go further. Professor George Makdisi has argued convincingly for a major eastern

contribution towards the emergence of the first universities in the medieval west, showing how terms such as having 'fellows' holding a 'chair', or students 'reading' a subject and obtaining 'degrees', as well as practices such as inaugural lectures and academic robes, can all be traced back to Islamic concepts and practices. Equally the organisation of universities by a new institution, an endowment administered by a trust, which covered the expenses of both the institution and the scholars within it, seems to be a borrowing from the Islamic Waqf system.[45]

For example, the ability to bestow an advanced degree, 'a licence to teach' (*licentia docendi*), is closely modelled on the Islamic *ijaza li-'l-tadris*, which Muslim scholars needed before they could embark on a teaching career in madrasas. Indeed, the idea of a university in the modern sense – a place of learning where students congregate near a well-stocked library to study a wide variety of subjects under several teachers – is generally recognised as having arrived in Europe via the Arab world. As Makdisi has demonstrated, it was cities bordering the Islamic world – Bologna, Salerno, Naples, Montpellier and finally Paris – that first developed universities in Europe, the idea spreading northwards from there.[46]

But where did the Arabs get the idea from? Recent research in Central Asia has made a convincing case that the first Islamic madrasas were modelled on the design of the Buddhist *viharas* such as the Barmakids' Naw Bahar that the Arabs came across when they seized Afghanistan and Sindh in the seventh century.[47] Indeed the first ever recorded madrasa was built just a few days' journey from Naw Bahar at Bost, in the unlikely location of Lashkar Gah, western Afghanistan. Like the Buddhist *viharas* of its day it had apartments and endowed scholarships for its students, domestic and foreign, as well as a good library.[48]

The courtyard plan of these early Buddhist monastery universities was first described in detail by Xuanzang at Nalanda, and is still visible there and at early Buddhist sites such as the Kushan-era *vihara* of Adzhina Tepe in Tajikistan, the Gandharan monastery of Takht-i-Bahi near Peshawar and Taxila near Islamabad. From there it passed to Persia: in eleventh-century Nishapur there were thirty-eight such madrasas pre-dating the founding of the greatest of these, the Nizamiyya, in 1038. Hence the idea of the college spread to al-Azhar in Cairo, then on across North Africa to al-Qarawiyyin University (now in Morocco), established in 956 and now recognised as the oldest living university in the world.[49] From the Maghreb the idea of the college, and the courtyard plan of a vaulted cloister giving on to the rooms for the students and their teachers, passed up through Spain to Paris.

Here, in 1180, was established the Collège des Dix-Huit, or the 'College of Eighteen Scholars'. Its founder was a wealthy English merchant, Jocius of London, who opened the college immediately after his return from Jerusalem, where madrasas built on the courtyard plan were once numerous. It was the oldest of the colleges which eventually became the University of Paris. The Collège des Dix-Huit, and its successor, the Sorbonne, founded by Robert de Sorbon around eighty years later, in or around 1257, retained the most essential characteristics of its direct ancestors, the madrasa, and before that the *vihara*, including the pious endowment that supported the student residents and professors, as well as a library and the courtyard form.[50]

From Paris it was only a short hop to the neatly clipped quads and courts of Oxford (which formally received its charter in 1248) and Cambridge (1264).

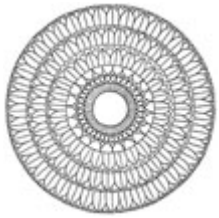
Some scholars go further. Christopher Beckwith argues that it was not just architecture and institutional forms that passed from the *viharas* of Buddhist Central Asia to the madrasas of the Islamic Middle East, and hence on to the universities of Christian Europe. Ideas, and ways of expressing them, came too. In particular, a technique of intellectual disputation may have passed along this route as well: the recursive argument method.[51]

This highly distinctive and unusual form of academic contention, with a formalised dialogue of argument and counter-argument, was first developed by Central Asian Buddhist scholars and is found, for example, in the Sanskrit works that Xuanzang sought out on his journey to Nalanda: the *Mahavibhasa* and Vasubandhu's *Treasury of Abhidharma*. According to Beckwith method passed to Baghdad at the time of the Barmakids, and according to some scholars later provided the model for the form of argument adopted by Ibn Sina and passed by him on to his followers among the intellectuals of al-Andalus, such as Ibn Rushd.

It was when the works of these two great masters were translated in twelfth-century Toledo that this method finally reached Europe. Ibn Sina's work *al-Nafs* (part of his great summa, the *Kitb al-shif* or 'Book of Healing') passed into Latin and quickly spread through Europe as the much celebrated and influential *De Anima*, 'On the Soul'. So it was that the recursive argument method eventually reached the new western centres of learning and shaped writing and disputation on medieval science, philosophy and theology.[52]

In time, Ibn Sina's modes of argument became an essential part of medieval Aristotelian scholasticism and helped to inspire the scholastic method used by the intellectuals of the age of Abelard, Thomas Aquinas, Albertus Magnus and Roger Bacon. Not all scholars are convinced by these arguments, and Beckwith's thesis has been challenged by several scholars. It is certainly possible that courtyard-based ground plans and argument methods developed independently in colleges in east and west. But that they could be linked is at the least an intriguing possibility.[53]

In this way it would be possible to trace a faint line from the Buddhist argument method via Ibn Sina/Avicenna to the medieval scholasticism of the early universities. If this is right, the ghost of Xuanzang's beloved Yogacara Buddhist texts can be seen lurking somewhere in the background of many of the most important ideas and arguments underpinning western thought during the Middle Ages.[54]



By the twelfth century, Indo-Arabic numerals had been known in Europe for a century, but despite the efforts of Pope Sylvester their use was still restricted to a few scholars, locked away in monasteries and the new universities. The man who changed this was Leonardo of Pisa (c.1175–1250), known by his nickname 'Fibonacci'. In due course, Fibonacci became probably the greatest mathematician of the European Middle Ages.

Fibonacci had grown up in a Pisan trading post at Bejaïa, in what is now Algeria. There his father Guglielmo, who was a member of a prominent Pisan merchant dynasty, directed the warehouses of the colony, as well as acting as trade representative and customs officer. Fibonacci travelled with him as a boy, and it was in Bejaïa in 1185 that he learned about the Indo-Arabic numeral system from his Arab teachers. He was also taught the latest Arab accounting methods, including the basis for what became the Italian art of double-entry bookkeeping.[55]

Later, Fibonacci travelled around the Mediterranean, pursuing his studies in Egypt and Syria, Greece and Spain, as well as meeting merchants and learning about their systems of doing arithmetic. He realised the many advantages of the Indo-Arabic system, which, unlike the Roman numerals still employed in Europe, allowed easy calculation using the place-value system.

In 1205 he returned to Italy with his father, and shortly afterwards, aged only thirty-two, he wrote the *Liber Abaci*, or the 'Book of the Abacus', also known as the 'Book of Calculation': 'When my father held the post of notary at the customs house at Bejaïa, he arranged for me to come to him,' wrote Fibonacci in the introduction.

> Because he thought it useful for me, he wanted me to spend a few days there in the mathematical school, and to be taught there. Here I was introduced to a wonderful teaching that used the nine figures of the Indias. With the sign 0, which the Arabs call zephyr (*al-sifr*), any number whatsoever can be written. Getting to know this pleased me far beyond all else and I set my mind to it … [Everything else] seemed to me as a kind of error in comparison with this method of the Indians … Therefore concentrating more closely on this, and studying it more attentively, adding a few things of my own, and also putting in some subtleties from Euclid's art of geometry, I made an effort to compose, in as intelligible a fashion as I could, this book, so that those seeking knowledge can be instructed by such a perfect method that in future the Latin race may not be found lacking in mathematical knowledge.[56]

The book provided the first really detailed Latin account of the *modus Indorum*, the method of the Indians, which Fibonacci believed was superior even to the method of Pythagoras. It brought to its readers the Indo-Arabic numbering system, spelled out by Khwarizmi, and before him Brahmagupta. *Al-sifr* is just a translation of the Sanskrit *sunya*, the concept of the void, which Brahmagupta first applied to zero. It was the first comprehensive and systematic work in Christian Europe on algebra, geometry and the Indo-Arabic numerals.[57]

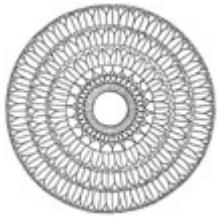
In one chapter, the *Liber Abaci* posed a riddle involving the growth of a population of rabbits: 'A certain

man had one pair of rabbits together in a certain enclosed place, and one wishes to know how many are created from the pair in one year when it is the nature of them in a single month to bear another pair, and in the second month those born to bear also.'[58]

The solution, generation by generation, was a series of numbers known as the celebrated Fibonacci Sequence. This was in turn related to the Golden Ratio, which Fibonacci realised was something which kept reappearing in nature: the spiralling of the chambers of the nautilus shell, for example, obeys this ratio.[59] Although Fibonacci's *Liber Abaci* contains the earliest known description of the sequence outside India, the sequence had been described by Aryabhata as early as the sixth century.

The first edition of the *Liber Abaci* did not, however, gain a wide audience, and Fibonacci seems to have considered it only a beginning. He continued his study and research in mathematics, and so absorbed did he become that he appears to have devoted his life to this pursuit and spent little time in the family firm, becoming a scholarly hermit shut away in his rooms in Pisa.

But in 1225 all this changed when Fibonacci's work came to the attention of the brilliant new Holy Roman Emperor and King of Jerusalem and Sicily, the Emperor Frederick II (1194–1250) known as *Stupor Mundi*, or 'Wonder of the World'.



Frederick II was the grandson of 'the Baptised Sultan', Roger II, and like his forebear he was a freethinking intellectual, a scholar and a statesman, polymath and philosopher. He was also an enthusiastic ornithologist and was fluent in five languages including Greek and Arabic. He had great charm and could dazzle anyone with the quickness of his wit. He also loved to startle his contemporaries with the audacity of his thought. 'I found him to excel in the rational sciences,' reported one Arab ambassador, 'and he is distinguished among all the Franks for his talents, his intelligence and his taste for philosophy, logic and medicine.' Another wrote that 'since the time of Alexander there has been no prince in Christendom such as he, not only because of his great power, but on account of the skill with which he dared oppose the Pope, their Caliph'.[60]

Frederick liked to surround himself with men of genius, Arab, Greek, Jewish and Latin, and generously patronised scholarship and translations from scholars of all faiths from across the Mediterranean. On one occasion, after having translations made of rare works of Aristotle, Ibn Rushd and Ibn Sina, he had copies despatched to the professors and students of the new universities of Paris and Bologna with a covering letter which explained that he had always been eager for knowledge, 'inhaling tirelessly its sweet and balsamic perfumes'.

But, he continued, the possession of knowledge is not weakened when shared with others but made more fruitful and more enduring; 'therefore we will not conceal these fruits gathered with so great effort … You men of learning, who cleverly draw fresh water from ancient reservoirs … have prior claim. Therefore, please deign to accept these books as a gift from your friend, the Emperor.'[61]

One of his closest advisers at this period was Michael Scot, who around 1220 had arrived at Palermo from Toledo to be Frederick's court astrologer, bringing with him many of the secrets of the Arabicised science of Castile. It was Scot's reputation for prophecy that led to his appointment, and soon after his arrival it is said that he successfully predicted the outcome of a war with the north Italian Lombard League.[62] As a result, Frederick charged him with writing a full description of the universe 'from its foundations to the uppermost reaches of heaven, including the location of paradise, purgatory and the Inferno'.

This curiosity and breadth of vision were Frederick's defining characteristics. He once asked a Jewish philosopher whether the purification rites of the red heifer, described in the Torah, might have their origin in Hindu practice. It is a question one can imagine no other Christian monarch of the time even being able to formulate. Frederick's book on falconry opens with the simple maxim: 'Our work is to present things that are as they are … One should accept as truth only that which is proved by the force of reason and by nature.'[63]

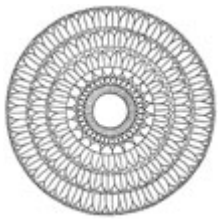
Although Frederick controlled territory from the Rhine to the shores of Sicily, his preferred residence was Palermo. Here the Sicilian kings maintained gorgeous and extensive pleasure gardens, many built by their Arab predecessors, where they bred leopards and hawks and kept menageries of giraffes, elephants, camels, lions, lynxes, apes, bears, peacocks and ostriches.[64] Beyond stretched a lake, stocked with fish, and a hunting park filled with animals such as fallow deer and wild boar. Here the Jewish traveller Benjamin of Tudela reported that the King used to take trips 'with his women' on the palace lake in gold- and silver-clad boats.

Around this fabulous complex, Sicilian Arab silk workers still produced Islamicate textiles for their new Christian rulers, often fringed with embroidered borders of Arabic calligraphy. Arab craftsmen built the ceiling of the Cappella Palatina (or Palatine Chapel), an exquisite gilt honeycomb using the intricate stalactite-like *muqarna* technique and decorated with images of chess players and musicians. Upstairs, gilt mosaics commissioned by Roger II show paired heraldic leopards, black-spotted and padding soft-footed under fruit trees as centaurs gambol amid a landscape of palms and cypresses; heraldic-looking lions stalk antlered stags as peacocks climb amid the volutes of vinescrolls.

The Emperor was a model of inquisitive tolerance and multiculturalism in an age of religious absolutism. It only amused him that he was denounced in some clerical quarters as the Antichrist or the Beast of the Apocalypse. It did not help his reputation with suspicious churchmen that he surrounded himself with Arab archer bodyguards and an Arab tutor of logic. Nor that he corresponded regularly on matters of philosophy, religion, algebra, astrology, mathematics and even geometry with the Arab rulers of Syria, Egypt and North Africa, as he sought the assistance of their scholars in solving his questions about the nature of this world and the next.[65]

This attitude was partly a result of having grown up in such a fertile meeting place of Arab, Greek and western culture. It was here in Sicily in 1138 that Frederick's grandfather minted a coin that displays the oldest official year date in Europe using not the old Roman numerals but the newly introduced Indo-Arab numbers. The front of the coin is decorated with a bust of Christ, very like that filling the apse of the Cappella Palatina. The back has four lines of Arabic reading, 'By the order of Roger the Magnificent, The Powerful through God', then the date 533 in the Muslim calendar, written in the Indo-Arabic form. On Roger II's death, his treasurer, Thomas Brown, returned to England as chancellor of the Exchequer to Henry II, where he tried to introduce these Indo-Arabic numerals but, at this stage at least, without success.

It was only under Frederick's rule, thanks to his meeting with Fibonacci, that this exotic Indo-Arabic innovation became normalised and began to spread to the rest of Europe.



In 1225 Frederick was on a visit to Pisa, travelling, in characteristic style, in a cavalcade filled with elephants, giraffes, camels and an aviary of hunting falcons, as well as his Crown jewels and much of his library. It was here that the Emperor was introduced to Fibonacci by an Arabic-speaking Spanish scholar named Dominicus who had chanced on the rare first edition of the *Liber Abaci*. He shared it with the Emperor, who read it in one sitting.

Together the two discussed at length a number of problems in geometry and algebra which were occupying Frederick's mind. After dinner, the Emperor submitted several mathematical problems to Fibonacci in a sort of mathematical tournament, through the mediation of Dominicus and his court philosopher, Master John of Palermo. The questions were exceptionally difficult and technical, involving algebra, cubic equations and sexagesimal fractions, but to the Emperor's admiring delight Fibonacci was instantly able to solve them all.[66]

At Frederick's request, Fibonacci later wrote them down in a book for the Emperor, and maintained contact with the scholars of the court. He formed a particular bond with Michael Scot. Both men were outsiders, brought up far from the courtly world of Palermo, and both had fallen for the intellectual excitement of the new scientific and mathematical ideas coming from India and the Islamic world. Michael sent Fibonacci a detailed commentary on the first edition of his manuscript, with many proposed changes

and corrections.[67]

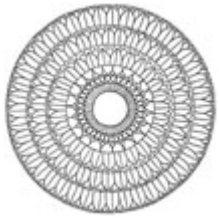
Fibonacci dedicated his next book, *Liber Quadratorum*, to Frederick. Three years later, in 1228, the Pisan dedicated a revised edition of the *Liber Abaci* to Michael Scot, travelling to Sicily to hand it over in person.* In it he thanked Scot for all he had done for him.

> You, my Master, Michael Scot, most great philosopher, wrote to my Lord [Frederick II] about the book on numbers which some time ago I composed and transcribed to you … I have given the complete doctrine of numbers according to the method of the Hindus, which method I have chosen as superior to others in this science … [Now] complying with your criticism, your more subtle examining circumspection, to the honour of you and many others, I with advantage corrected this work … Further, if in this work is found insufficiency or defect, I submit it to you for correction.[68]

Fibonacci need not have worried. The 1228 edition of Fibonacci's manuscript was enthusiastically copied and recopied over the years to come and was welcomed by scholars and merchants throughout Italy. Partially through the patronage of the imperial court, it ended up having a profound impact on European thought and practice. Crucially, under the influence of the pragmatic and practical Michael Scot, the second section had been aimed at a mercantile Italian audience, not just scholars, and showed the practical use and value of the Indo-Arabic numeral system by applying it to commercial bookkeeping, converting weights and measures, money changing and other trading applications.

It also provided systems for converting different currencies and for calculating profit and interest, and included various computing schemes and algorithms that could be worked out with pencil and paper, so freeing the merchants from the labours of an abacus or computing table and so making business calculations easier and faster. The arithmetical sections of the *Liber Abaci* in particular came to be taught throughout Italy, equipping students with basic algebra and geometry as well as all the accounting skills they would need. There were occasional reverses such as when, in 1299, the city of Florence briefly banned the new numerals, alleging they were more easily altered than the old Roman numbers, for example by changing 0 to 6 or 9, thus providing opportunities for falsification and fakery.[69]

But the progress of the Indo-Arabic numerals was ultimately unstoppable: these are the numerals that we now almost all use, around the world, every day. They are arguably the nearest thing the human race has to a universal language.



At exactly the same time that Indian numerals and mathematical ideas were beginning to spread into Europe from the Arab world, so transforming western science and mathematics, in Asia, ironically, Indic influence was fast diminishing. Indeed, in the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the Indosphere, an area of cultural influence which had been operational for over a thousand years, suddenly and dramatically imploded.

Islam had arrived at the frontiers of India within a few decades of the death of the Prophet Muhammad. In the eighth century, the first mosque in South Asia was built by the Ummayyad conquerors near the mouth of the Indus at Banbhore, not far from Karachi airport today. This was a frontier between the Islamicate and Indic worlds which stayed in place for 300 years.

By the eleventh century small Muslim trading communities were dotted around the subcontinent. Beyond the Indus frontier, Muslim places of worship began to appear in coastal regions, particularly on the Malabar and Coromandel coasts, often patronised by local Hindu rulers. There is a firmly dated stone mosque, the Kallupalli, at Srirangam in Tamil Nadu, which according to a contemporary inscription was built in 116 Hijri (731 CE). Another at Bhadreshvar in Gujarat dates from 1160. These compete with three others in the south for the distinction of being the oldest in India.[70]

By that point there were already substantial Muslim groups across north India, with community mosques in towns such as Gwalior in Madhya Pradesh and Sufi shrines across Gujarat.[71] Despite occasional raids by

Arab and Turkish armies from across the Indus – including one major incursion in 730s, when the Turkish army 'vomited forth arrows, maces and other weapons' before being 'ripped apart by the spears' of the Gujarati Chalukyas – these early Muslim trading communities seem to have lived in peaceful coexistence with their neighbours. The architectural idiom of these early mosques was often indistinguishable from that of their Jain and Hindu neighbours.[72]

This coexistence gave way to something quite different in the eleventh century. Persianised Turks from Ghazni in what is now central Afghanistan attacked Lahore in 1021, then Agra in 1080.[73] During the next century, a further group of Afghan pastoralists, the Ghurids, known for building an impressive minaret in Jam, suddenly burst into this world. They toppled the rulers of Ghazni and seized major Persian cities like Herat, Merv and Nishapur.

Muhammad bin Sam, later known as Muhammad Ghuri, governed the eastern part of the new empire for his brother the Sultan. In the 1180s he launched military campaigns through the Khyber pass. After first obliterating the Ismailis of Multan and the Ghaznavids of Lahore, Muhammad Ghuri turned his attention to the Chauhans of Ajmer, a Hindu-ruled kingdom with a significant Muslim population.

Unlike the Ghaznavids who returned with their loot to Afghanistan, the Ghurids stayed put in India and based themselves in Lahore from 1186. In several places, Ghuri's forces demolished their enemy's sacred temples and repurposed the ruins into mosques. Today, Ghuri is remembered as one of the worst temple-breakers in Indian history, and within a century Persian chronicles would label him a 'Ghazi' – a religiously inspired holy warrior. The truth, as usual, is more complex. Ghuri belonged to an obscure sect called the Karramiya, who were regarded as heretical by mainstream Sunni Muslims, and his coins feature the Hindu goddess Lakshmi on their reverse, which sits oddly with his later reputation as a fearsome iconoclast.[74]

From the beginning, medieval Sanskrit inscriptions do not identify the Islamic invaders by that term, not least because Indians had long been familiar with the Muslim traders who already lived among them in some numbers. Instead, the newcomers are identified by their linguistic and ethnic affiliation, both of which were quite new to the peoples of the plains: most typically they are identified as 'Lords of the Horses' or 'Turushka' – Turks. This suggests that at the time the invaders were seen primarily not in terms of their religious identity, but instead as the latest in a long line of nomadic horse-borne invaders who descended on India from the mountains and the steppe beyond.[75] Nevertheless there is no question that the newly arrived Turks were regarded as both outsiders and outcastes, beyond the pale of Indian society. Nor is there any question of the shock that their invasions and conquests caused.

In 1192, after initial setbacks, the Turks succeeded in defeating the Chauhans at the decisive Second Battle of Tarain, when according to the account of the contemporary historian Firishta, 300,000 Chauhans with 3,000 elephants were broken and scattered by a Turkish force of 10,000 elite mounted archers. The Turks then seized the Chauhan outpost at Delhi, and eventually captured and beheaded its ruler, Prithviraj Chauhan.[76]

The clash between Prithviraj and the Turks is the subject of a contemporary epic poem, the *Prithviraja Vijaya*, by the bard Jayanaka, which gives a very clear idea of the horror with which north India's ruling classes received these newcomers.[77] The poem opens with the invaders desecrating the sacred precincts of the holy lake at Pushkar, and the bard addressing Vishnu as follows:

> Your tears of joy that comprise the Narmada
> And Yamuna rivers used to enter Pushkar.
> But now only the effluvia of the Ghurids
> Who live nearby enters again and again.
>
> In the past heavenly courtesans smiled to themselves
> That Shachi had forbidden them from bathing in Pushkar
> So that she alone – Indra's beloved – could bathe there.
> Now the menstruating wives of these vile men plunge in.[78]

For Jayanaka, the new arrivals were filthy philistines. They did not even try to understand the accepted rules of either ritual or courtly behaviour, he complains; their diet and particularly their speech were foreign and ugly: 'squawking like the cry of wild birds … full of harsh sounds'.

For centuries up to this point, foreigners in all directions had aspired to master the grammatical complexities of Sanskrit, 'the Language of the Gods in the World of Men'. Now, to the horror of the poet, ill-

spoken and destructive foreigners with no sense of beauty or decorum had arrived in the Indic heartlands, overthrowing not just the political but also the civilisational order.

Between the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries, the Turks continued their work of conquest and settlement. By 1323, deploying their new military technology of horse archers with iron stirrups and heavy saddles, and supported by new siege equipment such as the trebuchet, the Turks had established a sultanate as far south as Madurai, towards the tip of the peninsula. By then, there were other sultanates all the way from Gujarat in the west to Bengal in the east.[79]

These conquests were often marked by violence and the destruction of Hindu, Jain and Buddhist sites. In what would become the capital of the new Delhi Sultanate, the slave general Qutb ud Din Aibak destroyed as many as twenty-seven temples before building the Qutb Minar. More violent still was the destruction meted out to the last Buddhist monasteries still surviving in Bihar.

The fate of Nalanda is much disputed: it had been in decline for centuries and archaeology shows that it was burned several times, with some of these conflagrations clearly dating to before the arrival of the Turks. [80]

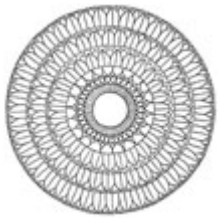
Either way, the Tibetan monk Dharmaswami, who visited Nalanda in 1235, describes the Turushka soldiers prowling the ruins while he and his guru lay hidden in a deserted monastery.[81] There is some evidence that Nalanda continued to function in a much reduced form until the early fourteenth century, when the last Tibetan monks are described as coming to study philosophy in its ruins. At this time, two small *viharas*, out of fourteen large monasteries and eighty-four small ones, remained in serviceable condition, perhaps rebuilt; seventy teachers remained to pass on their knowledge to students, having come to some sort of arrangement with their new Turkish masters. Indeed, the monastery apparently continued to receive modest support from a few wealthy merchants, and from Buddhasena, Raja of Magadha, who remained in place, having accepted the overlordship of the Delhi sultans. According to a Korean inscription, the Bihari monk Dhyanabhadra was ordained at Nalanda in the fourteenth century, before taking up an appointment at the court of the Mongol Emperor Kublai Khan.[82]

But there is no doubt as to what happened to Nalanda's near neighbour, the great monastery of Odantapura. In 1202, the same year that the young Fibonacci returned from Algeria to Italy, Bakhtyar Khalji's Turkish troops attacked the monastery, a royal foundation. After slaughtering its inhabitants, they found vast heaps of manuscripts within one of the monastic towers. 'Great plunder fell into the hands of the victors,' recorded one chronicler. 'The inhabitants of the place were Brahmanas with shaven heads. They were put to death. Large numbers of books were found there, and when the Mohammadans saw them, they called for some person to explain their contents. But all of the men had been killed, and there was no one left who could read them. It was discovered that the whole fort and city was actually a place of learning.'[83] The monastery was then turned into a Turkish fortress, garrisoned with soldiers and commanded by a Turkish general.[84]

A similar fate awaited the nearby monastery of Vikramashila, which had become the leading centre of Tantric Buddhist scholarship. By the thirteenth century 'there were no traces left, the Turushka soldiery having razed it to the ground and thrown the foundation stones into the Ganges'.[85] Here again, some scholars managed to escape to Nepal and Tibet, taking with them texts from the library. The last abbot of Vikramashila was one of these, arriving in Tibet in 1204, laden with the manuscripts he had managed to save.

Despite these small continuities and acts of salvage, the loss of the collected manuscripts and books of these great institutions of learning ranks as a civilisational catastrophe on a par with the burning of the Library of Alexandria. The later Tibetan author Taranatha had no doubt about the result of the raids. 'The law', he wrote, 'became almost extinct' in Hindustan.[86]

Large-scale desecration of Hindu, Jain and Buddhist monuments continued across India during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Several of the early Turkic sultans were energetic iconoclasts and made a point of building their mosques from the rubble of destroyed temples, in some of which can still be seen the defaced sculptures of their Hindu and Jain predecessors.



During the days of Nehruvian rule in the 1950s and early 1960s, Indian school textbooks and most academic histories were written by left-leaning, Congress-supporting figures. These historians tended to underplay the violence and iconoclasm that came with the Turkish invasions, partially in the interests of what they saw as 'nation building' following the terrible inter-religious violence that had taken place during partition. Today, under the current right-wing BJP government, the reverse is true and the destruction of Hindu temples is almost all that many in India seem to know of the complex but fascinating medieval period of Indo-Islamic history.

But a case can be made for another major event in world history having an equally devastating effect on the Indosphere. The same catastrophe also played an important role in bringing to a close the Golden Age of early India's economic and cultural influence.

Between 1219 and 1221, Temujin 'the Blacksmith', known as Genghis (or Chinggis) Khan, the founder of the Mongol Empire, burst into the Ghurids' Central Asian homelands, bringing fire and destruction to the great caravan cities of the region. By this stage, Genghis had already destroyed the largest and most powerful military in the world: that of the Jurchen Jin Empire which then ruled China. The invaders, 'countless, like locusts', and 'wearing the skins of dogs and mice', proved unstoppable. They 'came, they sapped, they burned, they slew, they plundered and they departed'. The Mongols, wrote another historian, 'spared none. They killed women, men, children, ripped open the bodies of the pregnant and slaughtered the unborn.' Old men, women and children, livestock and even dogs: all were slaughtered. One fortress city in central Afghanistan which received this treatment, is known to this day as the City of Screams.

From China, the Mongols brought the most sophisticated siege and artillery equipment in the world: massive and impressively powerful stone catapults, projectors of incendiary material and giant crossbows. They had even mastered the use of Chinese gunpowder for missiles and explosives – something terrifying, previously unseen and unknown.[87] Whole cities were razed to the ground and entire populations slaughtered: according to one source, 1.3 million were put to the sword at Merv alone.[88]

Genghis certainly intended to invade and loot India, but the subcontinent was spared by a freak occurrence. Genghis feared nothing human, but in 1224 he laid eyes on a rhinoceros near Multan; he believed it to be a demonic bad omen and immediately turned his army westwards towards the Crimea and Russia.[89] India was saved a Mongol visitation.[90] But the effects of Genghis's campaigns nevertheless changed India for ever.

Tens of thousands of terrified Persian-speaking refugees were driven down from the cities of central Asia to the plains around Delhi.[91] By the time the smoke had cleared Delhi had become one of the world's biggest cities and the centre of a cosmopolitan, culturally Persianate sultanate, full of learned madrasas staffed by refugee scholars, sheikhs, artisans and poets who had fled from Central Asia. Sanskrit and its vernacular derivatives Khari Boli, old Punjabi and Braj Bhasha, continued in use, but the language of the court, diplomacy and much scholarship was now carried out in Persian.[92]

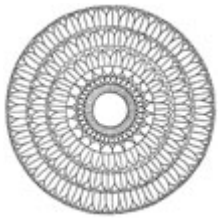
Verse written in Delhi was still read in thirteenth-century Central Asia, and the works of Bedil and Jamali were lauded for their beauty – but these verses were now mainly written in court Persian, not Sanskrit. Equally while Indian merchants, literati and other migrants continued to bring their religious ideas over the sea to South-east Asia, now what they brought was no longer the doctrines of the Buddha or ideas of Hindu kingship. Instead, by the fourteenth century, Gujarati Muslim Sufi mystics were beginning to spread their message to Java and the islands of Indonesia. Thus, ironically enough, the last great cultural export along the Golden Road from India to South-east Asia was Islam. Today, as a result of this activity, there are more Muslims in Indonesia than in the whole of the Arab world.[93]

Crucially, the Mongol conquests also destroyed the old trading networks, as India found itself outside a vast Mongol Empire and cut off from its northern neighbours with whom it was often at war. The diverse sultanates and kingdoms of India followed a relatively independent course for the next few hundred years.[94] Meanwhile, the Pax Mongolica, for the first time, linked the Mediterranean with the China Sea under the

rule of one khan, the Mongol Emperor and his network of client kings. Now, in place of a Golden Road focused primarily on the maritime trade of India, with its annual monsoon winds taking trade backwards and forwards at speed, a new trade network was born, which brought goods mainly overland, through the deserts of Central Asia, now under one single dominion.

Previously goods had moved along relatively small stretches of this road, passed from hand to hand in a mercantile relay race, but the many political boundaries obstructed large-scale, long-distance east-west transcontinental trade, stretching from the Mediterranean to the China Sea. Now all political boundaries had been swept away by the Mongol conquests and a long-distance trade route became viable for the first time. It was this road that brought Marco Polo to the court of Kublai Khan in his epic journey from Venice to Jerusalem and hence over the Pamirs to Kublai Khan's Xanadu in 1271.

The overland route he travelled on was not given a name until a German geographer coined a term for it in 1877. This was *die Seidenstraßen*. It is more familiar today under its English name, the 'Silk Roads'.



Despite the initial carnage, India eventually assimilated and transformed the new Turkish arrivals, as it had earlier populations of invaders from Central Asia, such as the Shakas and the Kushans. Within a few centuries, a hybrid Indo-Islamic civilisation had emerged out of the meeting of these two worlds, along with hybrid languages, such as Deccani and Urdu, which mixed the Sanskrit-derived vernaculars of India with Turkish, Persian and Arabic words.

Already in 1264, a bilingual inscription carved on a newly founded mosque in Veraval, near the great Hindu temple of Somnath in Gujarat, gives a picture of a town where two worlds were coming into intimate contact. The Persian text refers to the deity worshipped in the mosque as Allah, and describes the patron who raised it as 'the Sultan of Sea-Men, the sun of Islam and the Muslims'. By contrast the Sanskrit text identifies the deity in the mosque as Visvanatha ('Lord of the Universe'), Sunyarupa ('One Whose Form is the Void') and Visvarupa ('Having Various Forms'), while the Muslim patron is described as *dharma-bhandaya* – a supporter of *dharma*, the righteous cosmic order of justice and duty, as understood in classical Indian thought.[95]

A similar world can be observed through the Sanskrit inscription written by a Brahmin on a well dug in 1276 by a Hindu landowner at Palam just outside Delhi. Having saluted both Ganesh and Shiva, the Brahmin praises the new Sultan Balban for having brought such stability and contentment to his people that, he said, Vishnu 'relinquishing all worries sleeps in peace on the ocean of milk', protected by the Shesh Naga serpent. For him at least, Balban was simply a successor to the Tomar and Chauhan Rajputs who preceded him: there is no hint, at least in this inscription, of a major civilisational transition.

This is confirmed by the writings of the conservative Muslim intellectual Ziya al-Din Barani, who was horrified that the Sultan Balban 'not only allows but is pleased with the fact that infidels, polytheists, idol-worshippers and cow-dung worshippers build houses like palaces [in Delhi] … Musalmans beg of them at their doors; and in the capital of Islam … customs of infidelity are openly practiced, idols are publicly worshipped … they also adorn their idols and celebrate their rejoicings during their festivals with the beat of drums and dhols.'[96]

The polyglot poet, composer, courtier and Indian-born intellectual Amir Khusrau (1253–1325) is in many ways the symbol of this confluence of the two opposing cultures. Born to a father from Khurasan and a mother from Delhi, Khusrau is credited with giving Indian Islamic culture a distinctive flavour for the first time, bringing together Indian classical music and Islamic mysticism, or Sufism, together with the invention of the *qawwali*. He also played a major role in the literary flowering of Hindavi, the root from which both Urdu and Hindi developed. As he put it himself:

> The opposition has been removed from Turk and Hindu,
> For Hindustan has become one with Khorasan.[97]

The next period of Indian history saw a complex, multilingual, pluralistic and syncretic interaction between the Persian and the Sanskritic worlds, with Persian as the dominant court and diplomatic language, but with Sanskrit and Sanskrit-derived vernaculars remaining important and influential. Sanskritic stories and myths remained alive and still much loved. In this new world, the stories of the great Persian poet Ferdowsi about Shirin and Khusrau now began to coexist with the heroes of the *Mahabharata*, the Pandava and Kaurava brothers.[98] This was also the period the samosa (the Uzbek *sams*) and the naan arrived in northern India from Central Asia

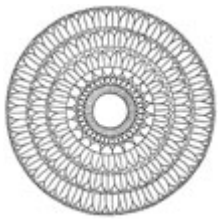
For the next few hundred years, India was not just the centre of what remained of its own Sanskrit Cosmopolis, but also part of a transregional Persianate world dominated by the Persian language and culture and bound together by a canon of texts that circulated in ever-widening ripples across much of Western Asia. By 1700, India was probably the world's leading centre for the patronage, production and study of Persian literature, with an estimated seven times more people literate in Persian in South Asia than in Iran.[99]

Mughal monarchs such as Akbar (1542–1605) and Dara Shukoh (1615–1659) commissioned an extensive programme of translation of sacred Sanskrit texts, while the earliest illustrated guide to yoga postures was painted in Allahabad/Prayagraj for Jahangir. In his court, Persian translations of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* from Sanskrit were commissioned, just as elsewhere in India Persian romance narratives such as Nizami's *Layli va Majnun* and Jami's *Yusuf va Zulakha* were being translated into numerous Indian languages.[100] Dara even composed a singular study of Hinduism and Islam, 'The Mingling of Two Oceans', which stressed the affinities of the two faiths and what he believed to be the Vedic origins of the Quran.

Akbar's near contemporary Ibrahim Adil Shah II, ruler of the Deccani kingdom of Bijapur, took this even further. Early in his reign Ibrahim gave up wearing jewels and adopted instead the *rudraksha* rosary of the Hindu sadhu. He visited both Shaivite temples and the monasteries of the Nath yogis, and knew Sanskrit better than Persian. According to one art historian, 'it is hard to label him either a Muslim or a Hindu; rather he had an aesthete's admiration for the beauty of both cultures.'[101]

In his songs Ibrahim uses highly Sanskritised language to shower equal praise upon Sarasvati, Hindu Goddess of Learning, the Prophet Muhammad and the Sufi saint Gesudaraz of Gulbarga. In the fifty-sixth song, this Muslim Sultan more or less describes himself as a Hindu god: 'He is robed in saffron-coloured dress, his teeth are black, the nails are red … and he loves all. Ibrahim whose father is God Ganesh, whose mother is Sarasvati, has a rosary of crystal round his neck … and an elephant as his vehicle.' Ibrahim's preferred Sanskrit title was Jagatguru, 'World Teacher'. Bringing together Hindu and Muslim in an atmosphere of heterodox learning, and uniting Persians, Africans and Europeans in a cosmopolitan artistic meritocracy, Ibrahim presided over a free-thinking court in which art was a defining passion.

Moreover, this was a process that went both ways. The great Hindu rajas of Vijayanagara described themselves as 'Sultans among Hindu Kings' and adopted Islamicate dress: Persian tunics of Chinese silks called *qabas* and tall, brocaded, brimless Persian headgear, the *kulah*.[102] At the same time, the Mughal Emperor Akbar adopted a vegetarian diet and shortened his hair in the manner of religious ascetics. He also abolished pilgrimage taxes on non-Muslim institutions and the *jizya* head tax on non-Muslims banned the killing of cows and peacocks. He also began giving generous land grants to Hindu temples, including 35 alone in Braj, the home of Krishna.



In Europe, the increasingly widespread use of Indic (or Indo-Arabic) numerals assisted the growth of banking and accounting, initially in Italy, under dynasties such as the Medici, and then in the rest of Europe. These innovations helped seed the commercial and banking revolution that financed the Renaissance and in time, as these ideas spread, the rise of Europe, ultimately helping propel it back towards the riches of India, the source of all these ideas.

Three centuries later the Perugian Renaissance scholar Luca Pacioli (1447–1517) came across a manuscript of the *Liber Abaci* in Venice and included it in his *Summa de Arithmetica*. Pacioli is known as 'the

Father of Accounting' due to his championing of double-entry bookkeeping, but he is a much more interesting figure than this may make him seem: he was a close friend of the architect and polymath Leon Battista Alberti and even briefly shared accommodation with Leonardo da Vinci. Pacioli's *Summa* was a huge compendium of mathematics written in Italian, which brought together the ideas of Euclid, Khwarizmi and Fibonacci in a single volume. It was finally published on one of the first printing presses in Venice in 1494.

This was just four years before Vasco da Gama landed in, then bombarded, Calicut, initiating the age of European colonialism and seizing control of the spice trade which had once brought so much Roman wealth to India.[103] In one of the great ironies of history, India gave the west the financial and commercial tools that Europe would later use to take over India itself.

For it was arguably European commercial prowess and initiative just as much as military might that gave Europe the edge over India. From the mid-eighteenth century it was a European corporation, the East India Company, run from the city of London by merchants and accountants, with their ledgers and careful accounting, who ran amok and seized and subjugated a fragmented and divided India in what was probably the supreme act of corporate violence in history.[104]

It was also the East India Company that helped bring to a close the era of Sanskrit–Persian coexistence that had lasted some 800 years, since the days of Amir Khusrau. Only then, in the early nineteenth century, did the lure of Persian begin to fade, as English slowly replaced it as the language of government, diplomacy and education in the course of dragging India, willingly or not, into the Anglosphere.[105]

Today, more than three-quarters of a century after independence from Britain, many believe that India's moment has come again, and that it is now returning to its traditional place at the centre of world affairs, bridging east and west and acting as a crossroads of civilisations. It is now more united and centralised than it has ever been in its entire history. Its economy has quadrupled in size in a single generation.

Its reputation as a centre for mathematics and scientific skills remains intact, as Indian software engineers increasingly staff the new Houses of Wisdom in Silicon Valley. The only questions are whether it is India, China or the United States which will dominate the world by the end of this century, and what sort of India that will be. Already, at the time of writing, India has the largest population in the world, and is now clearly on its way to becoming the world's third economic superpower. It has already overtaken the UK and will overtake Germany and Japan within the next decade.

History shows that India has always been at its most creative and influential when it is at its most connected, plural, hybrid, open and receptive to new ideas from its neighbours, when it represents the cohabitation, not a clash, of civilisations. Its greatest gift lies in its ability to absorb outside ideas and influences and take them forward in dramatic, creative, unorthodox and innovative ways, performing repeated feats of self-transformation and reincarnation. There lies much of the source of its strength.

For a thousand years, India's ideas spread with its traders along the Golden Road and transformed the world, creating around itself an Indosphere, a cultural zone that spread over political borders – comparable to the Hellenised world fashioned by Alexander the Great, except that India's was spread not by the sword but by the sheer power of its ideas. Within this area Indian culture and civilisation transformed everything they touched.

This poses a question, unthinkable in 1947 at independence from Britain: could they do so again?

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* Scott's *Lay of the Last Minstrel* (a poem I had recited to me almost in my cradle by my Borders nanny) contains a scene where Michael Scot's grave in Melrose Abbey is rifled for his magic books. Here Sir Walter Scott noted that 'in the south of Scotland any work of great labour is ascribed either to Auld Michael [Scot, the Wizard], William Wallace or the Devil'. Among his other magical feats, Michael Scot is said to have cleaved the mighty Eildon Hills in three.

* It is said that Scot's magic even enabled him to foresee his own death, which he believed would be caused by a stone falling on his head. As a precaution, he always wore an iron helmet. But, at least according to the folklore of the Scottish Borders, he took it off while attending mass in Melrose and, as predicted, a small stone did indeed fall on his head, causing his death in 1235. He is the only Scot to appear in Dante's *Inferno*, where his reputation as a necromancer won him a posthumous place in the Eighth Circle of Hell, enduring horrific tortures in the company of other distinguished sorcerers, magi and enchantresses.

Notes

Introduction: The Indosphere

1 Xuanzang, *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions*, trans. Li Rongxi (Berkeley, 1996), p. 41.

2 Sramana Huili and Shi Yancong , *A Biography of the Tripiṭaka Master of the Great Ci'en Monastery*, trans. Li Rongxi (Berkeley, 1995), pp. 94–5.

3 Lars Fogelin, *An Archaeological History of Indian Buddhism* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 204–5.

4 Xuanzang, *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions*, p. 250.

5 Wang Xiang , 'From Nālandā to Chang'an: A Survey of Buddhist Libraries in Medieval China (618–907)', in Tansen Sen (ed.), *Buddhism across Asia: Networks of Material, Intellectual and Cultural Exchange* (Singapore, 2014), pp. 207–32 at p. 210. Taranatha (1575–1634) was a Lama of the Jonang school of Tibetan Buddhism.

6 Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men* (Berkeley, 2003), p. 123.

7 There is one important qualification to the notion that the Indosphere stretching from the Hindu Kush to the Pacific has not been recognised as a connected region; early Arab writers certainly understood the coherence of the same swath of land and sea, and they gave it a name: al-Hind, meaning everything east of the Indus.

8 Sunil S. Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants* (Cambridge, Mass., 2013), pp. 8–14.

9 Matthew Adam Cobb, *Rome and the Indian Ocean Trade from Augustus to the Early Third Century* (Leiden, 2018), p. 139.

10 Sureshkumar Muthukumaran, *The Tropical Turn: Agricultural Innovation in the Ancient Middle East and the Mediterranean* (Oakland, 2023), p. 26.

11 Ibid., p. 56.

12 Pliny seems here to be thinking of silver to the amount of fifty-five million sesterces. Note that everyone gives a different amount here – Cobb says fifty million. Numbers are notoriously unstable in textual transmission. See the discussion in Himanshu Prabha Ray, *The Archaeology of Seafaring in Ancient South Asia* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 170; David Abulafia, *The Boundless Sea: A Human History of the Oceans* (London, 2019), p. 109; Christian Robin, 'The Date of the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* in the Light of South Arabian Evidence', p. 46, and Federico De Romanis, 'Rome and the *Nótia* of India: Relations between Rome and Southern India from 30 bce to the Flavian Period', pp. 84–5, 97, both in Federico De Romanis and André Tchernia (eds), *Crossings: Early Mediterranean Contacts with India* (New Delhi, 2005); Kasper Grønlund Evers, *Worlds Apart Trading Together: The Organisation of Long-Distance Trade between Rome and India in Antiquity* (Oxford, 2017), pp. 52, 68.

13 Strabo, *The Geography of Strabo*, trans. Horace Leonard Jones and J. R. Sitlington (London, 1917), p. 455. See also Grant Parker, *The Making of Roman India* (Cambridge, 2008), p. 179; Troy Wilkinson, 'Oikumenisation and the Ptolemaic Beginnings of the Indian Ocean Trade', in Serena Autiero and Matthew A. Cobb (eds), *Globalization and Transculturality from Antiquity to the Pre-Modern World* (Oxford, 2022), p. 144; Evers, *Worlds Apart Trading Together*, pp. 140–1; Jack Turner, *Spice: The History of a Temptation* (London, 2004), p. 59.

14 Professor Andrew Wilson of All Souls, head of the Oxford Roman Economy Project, has acknowledged that 'with 100 such cargoes a year (a conservative estimate, as Strabo a century before speaks of 120 ships a year leaving Myos Hormos for India), the customs revenue on the import trade alone through the Red Sea would have amounted to perhaps between a quarter and a third of the entire military budget for the Empire'. Andrew Wilson et al., 'A Forum on Trade', in W. Scheidel (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Economy* (Cambridge, 2014), pp. 287–320. See also Matthew Adam Cobb (ed.), *The Indian Ocean Trade in Antiquity: Political, Cultural and Economic Impacts* (Oxford, 2019), pp. 121, 134; Raoul McLaughlin, *The Roman Empire and the Indian Ocean: The Ancient World Economy*

and the Kingdoms of Africa, Arabia and India (Barnsley, 2014); Raoul McLaughlin, *The Roman Empire and the Silk Routes: The Ancient World Economy and the Empires of Parthia, Central Asia and Han China* (Barnsley, 2016); Evers, *Worlds Apart Trading Together*, p. 108.

15 James Howard-Johnston, 'The India Trade in Late Antiquity', in Eberhard Sauer (ed.), *Sasanian Persia: Between Rome and the Steppes of Eurasia* (Edinburgh, 2017), pp. 284–304, esp. pp. 287, 294–5. Steven E. Sidebotham, *Berenike and the Ancient Maritime Spice Route* (Berkeley, 2012), pp. 259–82. Procopius in the early sixth century observes that 'it was impossible for the Ethiopians to buy silk from the Indians, for the Persian merchants always locate themselves at the very harbours where the Indian ships first put in (since they inhabit the adjoining country), and are accustomed to buy the whole cargoes' (*The Persian War*, 1.20.12). But this same passage makes clear that Indian ships were still putting out to western Indian Ocean ports.

16 Meera Abraham, *Two Medieval Merchant Guilds of South India* (Old Delhi, 1988); Kanakalatha Mukund, *Merchants of Tamulakam: Pioneers of International Trade* (New Delhi, 2012); Paul Michel Munoz, *Early Kingdoms: Indonesian Archipelago and the Malay Peninsula* (Singapore, 2006), pp. 122–3. See E. Edwards McKinnon, 'Merchant Guilds: Merchant Links with Aceh and Northern Sumatra', in Arun Mahizhnan and Nalini Gopal (eds), *Sojourners to Settlers: Tamils in Southeast Asia* (Singapore, 2019), Vol. 1, pp. 136–44.

Gold prospecting was probably the major motivator in Indian involvement in South-east Asia, but it certainly was not the only reason for the marked eastward turn between 400 and 550 ce. There is evidence for Indian gold working in South-east Asia already from the late centuries bce, so there's nothing particularly new about Indians seeking gold in South-east Asia – indeed, it seems to have gone on for a very long time. But the scale of contact between the eastern coast of India and South-east Asia was now dramatically increasing.

This continued for many centuries to come. After the Chola incursion, there's growing evidence for Tamil gold prospecting in the interior of Sumatra (see E. Edwards McKinnon, 'Mediaeval Tamil Involvement in Northern Sumatra, c11–c14 (The Gold and Resin Trade)', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* Vol. 69, No. 1 (270) (1996), pp. 85–99).

17 Sureshkumar Muthukumaran stresses that much of the early trade from Egypt to the Mekong was in the hands of Tamil merchants: 'Rome's entry into the Indian Ocean world at the end of the first millennium bce also coincided with the emergence of new pan-oceanic carriers of trade, most notably the Tamils of the far south of India and northern Sri Lanka, whose dispatch of embassies to Rome in the age of Augustus suggests an earlier involvement in the western Indian Ocean world. Archaeological and epigraphic data in the Tamil-Brahmi script from the early centuries ce indicate that Tamil mercantile communities operated from the Straits of Malacca in Southeast Asia to the Red Sea frontier of Egypt, a trading network spread over 7,000 kilometers – a scale hitherto unknown. Like other mobile communities, Tamil traders and settlers moved botanical produce as trade commodities and for their own consumption. The macro-remains of coconut, rice, pepper, and mung bean at Roman Berenike and Myos Hormos on the Red Sea coast (first century ce), and the mung bean and horsegram at Khao Sam Kaeo in southern Thailand (c. 300 bce), have been interpreted as foodstuffs moved by Tamil seafarers and traders for their own consumption.' He also notes: 'Tamil-Brahmi epigraphs [have been found] at Phu Kao Thong (second century ce) and Khuan Luk Pat (third century ce) in southern Thailand, at Khor Rori in Oman (first century ce) and Berenike and Quseir al-Qadim on the Egyptian Red Sea coast (first century ce). South Indian ceramics have been found from the Red Sea region to Indonesia from the late centuries bce to the early centuries ce.' Muthukumaran, *The Tropical Turn*, p. 104.

18 Malini Saran and Vinod C. Khanna, *The Ramayana in Indonesia* (New Delhi, 2004), pp. 20–1. Tom Hoogervorst, *Southeast Asia in the Ancient Indian Ocean World* (London, 2013), pp. 17–18, 23. André Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, Vol. 1: *Early Medieval India and the Expansion of Islam, 7th–11th Centuries* (Leiden, 2002), pp. 336–7.

19 K. Rajan, 'Emergence of Early Historic Trade in Peninsula India', pp. 190–1; also John Guy, 'Tamil Merchants and Hindu–Buddhist Diaspora in Early Southeast Asia', pp. 248–50, both in Pierre-Yves Manguin, A. Mani and Geoff Wade (eds), *Early Interactions between South and Southeast Asia: Reflections on Cross-Cultural Exchange* (Singapore, 2011). V. Selvakumar, 'Material Evidence for Early Interactions between the South-East Coast of India and South-East Asia', in Kenneth R. Hall, Suchandra Ghosh, Kaushik Gangopadhyay and Rila Mukherjee (eds), *Cross-Cultural Networking in the Eastern Indian Ocean Realm, c100–1800* (New Delhi, 2019), pp. 50–1.

20 Suresh Muthukumaran, 'The Tamil Diaspora in Pre-Modern Southeast Asia: A Longue Durée

Narrative', in Arun Mahizhnan and Nalini Gopal (eds), *Sojourners to Settlers: Tamils in Southeast Asia* (Singapore, 2019), Vol. 1, pp. 26–44 at p. 29.

21 John N. Miksic, 'Introduction: The Beginning of Trade in Ancient Southeast Asia: The Role of Oc Eo and the Lower Mekong Delta', in James C. M. Khoo (ed.), *Art and Archaeology of Fu Nan: Pre-Khmer Kingdom of the Lower Mekong Valley* (Bangkok, 2003), pp. 1–33 at pp. 18–19. There has been a similar profusion of early gold ornaments in early Thai sites such as Phu Khao Thong; see Boonyarit Chaisuwan, 'Early Contacts between India and the Andaman Coast in Thailand from the Second Century bce to Eleventh Century ce', in Manguin, Mani and Wade (eds), *Early Interactions between South and Southeast Asia*, pp. 90–1.

22 Richard C. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road: Overland Trade and Cultural Exchange from Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century* (New York, 1999), p. 54.

23 Eleanor Mannikka, *Angkor Wat: Time, Space, and Kingship* (Honolulu, 1996), p. 1.

24 Kim Plofker, *Mathematics in India* (Princeton, 2009), p. 317.

25 Charles Burnett, 'Fibonacci's "Method of the Indians" ', in his *Numerals and Arithmetic in the Middle Ages* (Farnham, 2010), p. 87.

26 Sylvian Lévi, *L'Inde civilisatrice: aperçu historique* (Paris, 1938), quoted in George Coedès, *The Indianised States of Southeast Asia* (Honolulu, 1964), p. xvi; and quoted in Kwa Chong-Guan (ed.), *Early Southeast Asia Viewed from India,* (New Delhi, 2013) p. xxii, xxxviii.

27 T. C. A. Raghavan, 'Temptations of a Greater India', *Open Magazine* (New Delhi), 8 March 2018.

28 R. C. Majumdar, *Ancient Hindu Colonies in the Far East* (Calcutta, 1944), p. 27.

29 Quoted by Kwa Chong-Guan, Early Southeast Asia Viewed from India (New Delhi, 2013), p. xxx.

30 Ibid, p. xvi.

31 Personal communication with Éric Bourdonneau. See also Manguin, Mani and Wade (eds), *Early Interactions between South and Southeast Asia*; John Guy (ed.), *Lost Kingdoms: Hindu–Buddhist Sculpture of Early Southeast Asia* (New York, 2014), p. 3.

32 For the historiography of the Greater India Society see T. C. A. Raghavan, 'Etched in Stone: Archaeology and Geopolitics', *The Telegraph* (India), 14 August 2020. Also Hermann Kulke, *History of Precolonial India* (New Delhi, 2108), pp. 267–71, and Susan Bayly, 'Imagining "Greater India": French and Indian Visions of Colonialism in the Indic Mode', *Modern Asian Studies* Vol. 38, No. 3 (July 2004), pp. 703–44. Two western historians who have gone out of their way to minimise Indian influence on South-east Asia are Claude Jacques and Michael Vickery.

33 Andrea Acri and Peter Sharrock (eds), *The Creative South: Buddhist and Hindu Art in Mediaeval Maritime Asia*, 2 vols (Singapore, 2022), p. 4.

34 Debra Diamond, *Yoga: The Art of Transformation* (Washington, DC, 2014).

35 Richthofen was the grandfather of the First World War flying ace, 'the Red Baron', of the same name. Not everyone accepts that he was the father of the term, and it has recently been suggested that it was part of academic lore and that he just popularised it. See Mertens Matthias, 'Did Richthofen Really Coin "the Silk Road"?', *The Silk Road* No. 17 (2019), 1–9. Tamara Chin, 'The Invention of the Silk Road, 1877', *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 40, No. 1 (2013), pp. 194–219; Xin Wen, *The King's Road: Diplomacy and the Remaking of the Silk Road* (Princeton, 2023).

36 Richthofen's writings, including the multi-volume geological survey of China, later guided the German colonial seizure of the north-eastern port of Qingdao. See Chin, 'The Invention of the Silk Road, 1877', p. 196.

37 Franck Billé, Sanjyot Mehendale and James W. Lankton (eds), *The Maritime Silk Road: Global Connectivities, Regional Nodes, Localities* (Amsterdam, 2022), Introduction, p. 11; Peter Frankopan, *The New Silk Roads: The Present and the Future of the World* (London, 2018); Shyam Saran, *How China Sees India: The Authoritative Account of the India–China Relationship* (New Delhi, 2022), pp. 31–2.

38 D. D. Leslie and K. H. J. Gardiner, *The Roman Empire in Chinese Sources* (Rome, 1996), p. 15.

39 Lionel Casson (ed. and trans.), *The Periplus Maris Erythraei* (Princeton, 1989), 64, p. 91, quoted in Christoph Baumer, *The History of Central Asia*, Vol. 2: *The Age of the Silk Roads* (London, 2014), p. 49.

40 Josephine Quinn, *How the World Made the West: A 4,000-Year History* (London, 2024), p. 271.

41 Warwick Ball, *Rome in the East: The Transformation of an Empire* (London, 2016).

42 J. M. Kenoyer, 'Textiles and Trade in South Asia during the Proto-Historic and Early Historic Period', in B. Hildebrandt and C. Gills (eds), *Silk: Trade and Exchange along the Silk Roads between Rome and China in Antiquity* (Oxford, 2017), pp. 7–26 at pp. 18–24.

43 Quinn, *How the World Made the West*, p. 271.

44 One wonders what he then did with it – distributed to his people or sold on the market back to the Romans? See Ernst Emanuel Mayer, 'Tanti non emo, Sexte, Piper: Pepper Prices, Roman Consumer Culture, and the Bulk of Indo-Roman Trade', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* Vol. 61, No. 4 (2018), pp. 560–89 at p. 576; Turner, *Spice*; Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (London, 2015); Muthukumaran, *The Tropical Turn*, p. 62.

45 It appears doubtful whether these are actually ancient imports, even assuming the nineteenth-century information about them is accurate. For the references see Qiang Li, 'Roman Coins Discovered in China and their Research', *Eirene: Studia Graeca et Latina* Vol. 51 (2015), pp. 279–99, notably p. 280 – online at https://www.academia.edu/19512723/ROMAN_COINS_DISCOVERED_IN_CHINA_AND_THEIR_RESEARCH. See also Ball, *Rome in the East*, p. 154.

46 Quoted by Elizabeth Rosen Stone, 'Reflections of Roman Art in Southern India', in Akira Shimada and Michael Willis (eds), *Amaravati: The Art of an Early Buddhist Monument in Context* (London, 2016), pp. 59–69 at p. 60; Evers, *Worlds Apart Trading Together*, p. 158. There is a full discussion about Roman coin hoards in India in Roberta Tomber, *Indo-Roman Trade: From Pots to Pepper* (London, 2008), pp. 30–7. She gives a figure of 6,000 denarii and 800 aurei recently unearthed as part of hoards, along with large numbers of copper coins in around seventy-five major find spots. Most are of Julio-Claudian date. See also Parker, *The Making of Roman India.*

47 S. Suresh and Upinder Singh both estimate that around 170 Roman coin hoards have been found in around 130 sites; 80 per cent of them date from the Julio-Claudian period, particularly the reign of Augustus (27 bce–14 ce) and Tiberius (14–37 ce). Most were found in south India, and the largest concentrations were from Coimbatore and the Krishna river valley in Andhra Pradesh. See S. Suresh, *Symbols of Trade: Roman and Pseudo-Roman Objects Found in India* (New Delhi, 2004), pp. 26–81; Upinder Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the Twelfth Century* (New Delhi, 2009), pp. 412–17. Upinder Singh suggests that in other areas which had intense contact with Rome but which have yielded fewer hoards, notably the Kushan Kingdom and the regions ruled over by the Satavahana dynasty, Roman coins may have been melted down and reminted. This is supported by the fact that both areas had well-established coinages.

48 So says the classicist Mary Beard in a personal communication, May 2023. See also Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India*, pp. 408–10.

49 Chin, 'The Invention of the Silk Road, 1877'; Tansen Sen, 'Inventing the Maritime Silk Road', *Modern Asia Studies* Vol. 57 (2023), pp. 1,059–104.

50 Frankopan, *The New Silk Roads.*

51 The IMEC was announced in September 2023 then apparently 'shelved' three months later. The idea will no doubt be revived in due course. Brendan Murray, 'Plans for an India-to-Europe Trade Route Get Shelved', Bloomberg, 24 January 2024.

52 The terms 'India' and 'China' are both notably fluid concepts in the pre-twentieth-century context with fuzzy and ever-changing borders. There were always many kingdoms and empires within the area that now forms the Republic of India, even during those relatively rare periods when large areas of it were under the hegemony of a single empire or a single dominant *chakravartin* emperor. Some of these kingdoms, the Mauryan and Mughal Empires, for example, extended well beyond the borders of contemporary India into Afghanistan. At other times, foreign empires, such as that of the Kushans, penetrated deep into the present-day Indian Republic. In this book, therefore, 'India' refers not to a political entity but to the geographical region that now consists of India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan and Afghanistan south of the Hindu Kush. 'China' denotes the areas ruled by the Tang dynasty.

53 The monastery of Nagarahara near modern Jalalabad was regarded as the frontier of ancient Gandhara, but the 'Middle Country' of Brahmanical India proper began at Mathura, according to Xuanzang's interlocutors. Xuanzang, *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions*, p. 41.

54 Samuel Beal (ed.), *Travels of Fah-Hian and Sung-Yun, Buddhist Pilgrims, from China to India (ad 399–414) in Search of the Buddhist Books of Discipline* (New York, 1965). The best account of ancient ideas of India is to be found in the chapter entitled 'What is India?' in Diana L. Eck's *India: A Sacred Geography* (New York, 2012).

55 Quoted by Alexander Hamilton, *The Ancient Geography of India* (London, 1871), pp. 1–3.

56 *Mahabharata* vi: 9. There are similar formulations in the *Agni Purana* 118.1; *Brahma Purana* 19.1; *Vayu Purana* 45.75–7; *Vishnu Purana* II.3.1.

1 One of Smith's companions was my forebear Major Sam Dalrymple, whose Mughal-style tomb lies beneath St Thomas Mount on the road leading into Chennai from the airport. With thanks to Dieter Schlingloff, who was kind enough to write to tell me of Sam's part in rediscovering Ajanta. Although I had written about Smith's discovery on several occasions, prior to receiving Dieter's letter I had no idea of the family connection.

2 John Keay, *India Discovered: The Recovery of a Lost Civilization* (London, 1981), pp. 148–58. There is some evidence that the caves were already well known locally.

3 The early murals of Caves 9 and 10 have only recently been restored and have been little studied. See William Dalrymple, 'Fragile Legacy: The Paintings of Ajanta Caves 9 and 10', *Marg: A Magazine of the Arts* Vol. 66, No. 3 (March 2015), pp. 12–21; William Dalrymple, 'The Greatest Ancient Picture Gallery', *New York Review of Books*, 23 October 2014. The more famous murals of Cave 1 are rather later and date from around 550 ce.

4 Barbara Stoler Miller (ed.), *Exploring India's Sacred Art: Selected Writings of Stella Kramrisch* (Delhi, 1994), p. 301.

5 William Dalrymple, 'The Ajanta Cave Paintings – Nothing less than the birth of Indian art', *Guardian*, 15 August 2014.

6 The dates are much disputed, but scholars seem currently to favour c.563–483 bce, though at least one leading authority, Richard Gombrich, prefers a significantly later date of around 380 bce.

7 Uma Chakravarti, *The Social Dimensions of Buddhism* (New Delhi, 1987), p. 19. Johan Elverskog, *The Buddha's Footprint: An Environmental History of Asia* (Philadelphia, 2020), pp. 14–15.

8 John Guy, 'Early Buddhist Landscape of Southern India', in John Guy (ed.), *Tree & Serpent: Early Buddhist Art in India* (New York, 2023), pp. 18–25 at p. 22; Vidya Dehejia, *Indian Art* (London, 1997); Chakravarti, *The Social Dimensions of Buddhism*, p. 35.

9 'The Nun's Tale', the first chapter of my *Nine Lives*, gives a portrait of the Jain faith. William Dalrymple, *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India* (London, 2009).

10 Quoted by Sunil Khilnani in *Incarnations: India in 50 Lives* (London, 2016), p. 7; Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 14–15.

11 *Vinaya-pitaka*, Vol. I, verses 181–2, quoted by Dehejia in her *Indian Art*, p. 40.

12 The *Mahaparinirvanasutra*, as quoted in John Kieschnick, *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture* (Princeton, 2003), pp. 2–3.

13 Richard Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought* (London, 2009), p. 49.

14 E. Zürcher, *Buddhism: Its Origin and Spread in Words, Maps and Pictures* (London 1962); Kurt Behrendt, *How to Read Buddhist Art* (New York, 2019), p. 23.

15 Dieter Schlingloff, *Studies in the Ajanta Paintings: Identifications and Interpretations* (Delhi, 1987), pp. 1–13; Dieter Schlingloff, *Ajanta: Handbook of the Paintings*, 2 vols (New Delhi, 2013), Vol. 1, pp. 17–73.

16 Osmund Bopearachchi, 'Indian Ocean Trade through Buddhist Iconographies', in Franck Billé, Sanjyot Mehendale and James W. Lankton (eds), *The Maritime Silk Road: Global Connectivities, Regional Nodes, Localities* (Amsterdam, 2022), pp. 243–65; Pia Brancaccio, *The Buddhist Caves at Aurangabad: Transformations in Art and Religion* (Leiden, 2011), p. 80.

17 Himanshu Prabha Ray, *Archaeology and Buddhism in South Asia* (Oxford, 2018), p. 3.

Elverskog, *The Buddha's Footprint*, p. 13: 'The earliest corpus of Buddhist teachings, the Pali Canon, was not written down until the first century before the Common Era, and far away in Sri Lanka, so what we know about the Buddha comes from material compiled several centuries after he lived.'

18 Himanshu Prabha Ray, *The Archaeology of Seafaring in Ancient South Asia* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 251; Lars Fogelin, *An Archaeological History of Indian Buddhism* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 82–3. The excavations at Lumbini were directed by Robin Coningham of the University of Durham: Robin Coningham et al., 'The Earliest Buddhist Shrine: Excavating the Birthplace of the Buddha, Lumbini (Nepal)', *Antiquity* Vol. 87, Issue 338 (2013), pp. 1,104–23.

19 Patrick Olivelle in his excellent new biography of Ashoka makes a case for Buddhism being more widely spread around India and even Sri Lanka by the time of Ashoka, but the evidence seems fragementary at best. See Chapter Three of *Ashoka: Portrait of a Philosopher King* (New Delhi, 2023).

20 Robin Lane Fox, *Alexander the Great* (London, 1973), p. 479.

21 Colleen Taylor Sen, *Ashoka and the Maurya Dynasty: The History and Legacy of Ancient India's Greatest*

Empire (New Delhi, 2022), p. 58.

22 Richard Stoneman, 'Naked Philosophers: The Brahmans in the Alexander Historians and the Alexander Romance', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* Vol. 115 (1995), pp. 99–114, esp. p. 103.

23 Ibid., pp. 102–5.

24 Christopher I. Beckwith, *Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia* (Princeton, 2015), pp. 16–19, 73; Giorgios T. Halkias, 'When the Greeks Converted the Buddha: Asymmetrical Transfers of Knowledge in Indo-Greek Cultures', in Peter Wick and Volker Rabens (eds), *Religions and Trade: Religious Formation, Transformation and Cross-Cultural Exchange between East and West* (Leiden, 2014), pp. 65–116, esp. pp. 74–7; Everard Flintoff, 'Pyrrho and India', *Phronesis* Vol. 25, No. 1 (1980), pp. 88–109; Eric Seldeslachts, 'Greece, the Final Frontier: The Westward Spread of Buddhism', in Ann Heirman and Stephan Peter Bumbacher (eds), *The Spread of Buddhism* (Leiden, 2012), pp. 131–66 at p. 133.

25 A. H. Dani, *The Historic City of Taxila* (Paris, 1986).

26 Plutarch, *Vitae Alexander* (The Life of Alexander), trans. B. Perrin (Cambridge, Mass., 1919), p. 62.

27 Sen, *Ashoka and the Mauryan Dynasty*, p. 54.

28 Sushma Jansari, *Chandragupta Maurya: The Creation of a National Hero in India* (London, 2023), p. 15.

29 Suchandra Ghosh, *From the Oxus to the Indus: A Political and Cultural Study, c.300 bce to 100 bce* (New Delhi, 2017), p. 25.

30 Romila Thapar, *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (New Delhi, 1973), p. 22. Patrick Olivelle states that, in addition, Chandragupta may himself have married a Greek bride, which was the common practice at the time and intended to seal peace treaties: see *Ashoka: Portrait of a Philosopher King*, p. 11. Josephine Quinn, *How the World Made the West: A 4,000-Year History* (London, 2024). John Boardman notes that the Selucids developed a howdah for their elephants with a turret 'making them more like tanks': see John Boardman, *The Greeks in Asia* (London, 2015), p. 64.

31 Ghosh, *From the Oxus to the Indus*, pp. 30–1. Jason Neelis, *Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks: Mobility and Exchange within and beyond the Northwestern Borderlands of South Asia* (Leiden, 2011), p. 81. Sureshkumar Muthukumaran, *The Tropical Turn: Agricultural Innovation in the Ancient Middle East and the Mediterranean* (Oakland, 2023), p. 58.

32 Romila Thapar, 'Early Mediterranean Contacts with India: An Overview', in Federico De Romanis and André Tchernia (eds), *Crossings: Early Mediterranean Contacts with India* (New Delhi, 2005), p. 19.

33 Sushma Jansari maintains that the traditions about Chandragupta becoming a Jain monk and starving himself to death are late and unreliable. See Jansari, *Chandragupta Maurya*, pp. 20–3.

34 Étienne Lamotte, *History of Indian Buddhism* (Louvain, 1988), pp. 216–22; Fogelin, *An Archaeological History of Indian Buddhism*, p. 75.

35 Olivelle, *Ashoka: Portrait of a Philosopher King*, p. 10; Elverskog, *The Buddha's Footprint*, pp. 102–3.

36 Olivelle, *Ashoka: Portrait of a Philosopher King*, p. xxi.

37 In Chapter Four of his best-selling and influential book, *The Ocean of Churn: How the Indian Ocean Shaped Human History* (New Delhi, 2017), Sanjeev Sanyal has challenged traditional scholarship on Ashoka, painting a far less flattering portrait of the Emperor and suggesting he may already have been a Buddhist when he embarked on his bloody campaign among the Kalingas. He also questions the sincerity of Ashoka's commitment to non-violence and suggests his epithet Ashoka 'without sorrow' could originally have been intended to convey his reputation for a lack of remorse, something the pillar edicts were intended to rectify as part of an imperial PR campaign.

The dating is unclear, and scholars are divided as to the exact chronology of much of Ashoka's reign. While the debate will no doubt continue, it is interesting to note that in his recent biography, widely regarded as authorative, Patrick Olivelle goes with the traditional narrative of Ashoka's conversion coming as a reaction to the bloodshed of the Kalinga campaign: *Ashoka: Portrait of a Philosopher King.*

38 Neelis, *Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks*, p. 88.

39 Major Rock Edict 13. Romila Thapar, *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (Oxford, 2012), p. 255.

40 Richard Salomon has pointed out how far Ashoka remains an unusual figure in Indian history and how little his epigraphic innovations were followed up by the rulers who came after him. See Richard Salomon, 'Aśoka and the Epigraphic Habit in India', in Patrick Olivelle (ed.), *Aśoka: In History and Historical Memory* (Delhi, 2009), pp. 45–52.

41 Nayanjot Lahiri, *Ashoka in Ancient India* (Ranikhet, 2015), p. 12.

42 Salomon, ‘Aśoka and the Epigraphic Habit in India’, p. 46.

43 Singh, *Political Violence in Ancient India*, pp. 40–6, 54–6; Upinder Singh, *Ancient India: Culture of Contradictions* (New Delhi, 2021), pp. 172–7; Olivelle, *Ashoka: Portrait of a Philosopher King*, pp. 24–5.

44 The *Dipavamsa* 6.45 as quoted by Lahiri in *Ashoka in Ancient India*, pp. 109–10. The text dates from many centuries later and some scholars would claim that it should be taken with a pinch of salt.

45 Rupnath Minor Rock Edict. Salmon, ‘Aśoka and the Epigraphic Habit in India’, p. 45.

46 Harry Falk, *Aśokan Sites and Artefacts: A Source Book with Bibliography* (Mainz am Rhein, 2006), p. 55.

47 This is certainly how Patrick Olivelle interprets the later Pillar Edicts: Olivelle, *Ashoka: Portrait of a Philosopher King*, pp. 151–205. See also Guy, ‘Early Buddhist Landscape of Southern India’, p. 20.

48 Major Rock Edict 12.

49 First Minor Rock Edict. Falk, *Aśokan Sites and Artefacts*, p. 55.

50 Olivelle (ed.), *Aśoka: In History and Historical Memory*, Introduction, p. 1; Thapar, *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, pp. 41, 51, 216; Richard C. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road: Overland Trade and Cultural Exchange from Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century* (New York, 1999), p. 38; Lamotte, *History of Indian Buddhism*, pp. 223–59.

51 Donald K. Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia* (New York, 1995), p. 68.

52 Major Rock Edict 13. Translation according to Thapar, *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, p. 255.

53 Olivelle, *Ashoka: Portrait of a Philosopher King*, pp. 202–3, drawn on F. R. Adrados, ‘Aśoka’s Inscriptions and Persian, Greek and Latin Epigraphy’, in S. D. Joshi (ed.), *Amrtadhara: Professor R. N. Dandekar Felicitation Volume* (Delhi, 1984), pp. 1–15. The way that Antiochus of Commagene uses the Greek term *eusebeia* apparently echoes Ashoka’s use of the term *dharma*.

54 This is certainly suggested by recent excavations at early Buddhist sites in the south of Sri Lanka such as Tissa and Rajagala (with thanks to Himanshu Prabha Ray who pointed this out).

55 Tilman Frasch, ‘A Buddhist Network in the Bay of Bengal: Relations between Bodhgaya, Burma and Sri Lanka, c.300–1300’, in Claude Guillot, Denys Lombard and Roderich Ptak (eds), *From the Mediterranean to the China Sea: Miscellaneous Notes* (Weisbaden, 1990), pp. 69–92 at pp. 72, 75, 78.

56 Mahinda’s remains are still venerated in one of the oldest surviving stupas in the very early hilltop monastic complex of Rajagala in central Sri Lanka.

57 The *Dipavamsa* 12.5–6. Thapar, *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, pp. 58, 179. Robin A. E. Coningham, Mark Manuel, Christopher Davis and Prishanta Gunawardhana, ‘Archaeology and Cosmopolitanism in Early Historic and Medieval Sri Lanka’, in Zoltán Biedermann and Alan Strathern (eds), *Sri Lanka at the Crossroads of History* (London, 2017), pp. 19–43; Robin A. E. Coningham, ‘Monks, Caves and Kings: A Reassessment of the Nature of Early Buddhism in Sri Lanka’, *World Archaeology* Vol. 27, No. 2 (October 1995), pp. 222–42; Stephen C. Berkwitz, ‘The Expansion of Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia’, in Volkhard Krech and Marion Steinicke (eds), *Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe: Encounters, Notions, and Comparative Perspectives* (Leiden, 2012), pp. 223–34.

58 Alexander Kapukotuwa et al., ‘Preliminary Report on Rajagala Archaeological Research Project 2018–19’, *Journal of Indian Ocean Archaeology* No. 13–14 (2017–18), pp. 101–37.

59 Up to that point the words had been preserved orally by monastic recitation specialists. See Guy, ‘Early Buddhist Landscape of Southern India’, p. 18.

60 Boardman, *The Greeks in Asia*, pp. 130–1. In the ‘Tree & Serpent’ show of Buddhist art held at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in 2023, the curator John Guy placed a Mauryan lion’s-head capital from Bihar next to a lion-headed gold Achaemenid Persian rhyton, or drinking horn: the two were almost identical. See Guy (ed.), *Tree & Serpent*, pp. 170–1.

61 Bopearachchi, ‘Indian Ocean Trade through Buddhist Iconographies’, p. 246.

62 The *Vinaya Pitika*, quoted by Neelis, *Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks*, p. 1.

63 Guy, ‘Early Buddhist Landscape of Southern India’, p. 22.

64 Of course, these two paths are not mutually exclusive. The monasteries and shelters were made to house monks during the rainy season, and they were to wander much of the remainder of the year. This was probably the case from the beginning. The Buddha himself stayed put during the monsoon months. See Fogelin, *An Archaeological History of Indian Buddhism*, p. 26.

65 Himanshu Prabha Ray, *Monastery and Guild: Commerce under the Satavahanas* (Delhi, 1986), pp. 34–5, 50; Brancaccio, *The Buddhist Caves at Aurangabad*, p. 51.

66 Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy*

and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India (Honolulu, 1977), p. 75.

67 Ibid., pp. 116, 34, 93, 126.

68 Dehejia, *Indian Art*, pp. 103–7.

69 Gregory Schopen, *Buddhist Nuns, Monks, and Other Worldly Matters: Recent Papers on Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu, 2014), p. 229.

70 Walter M. Spink, *Ajanta: History and Development*, 6 vols (Leiden, 2011), Vol. 1, p. 1.

71 Guy, 'Early Buddhist Landscape of Southern India', p. 24; Brancaccio, *The Buddhist Caves at Aurangabad*, p. 134.

72 Although it was probably the Buddhists who first spread the worship of stone images across South Asia, it is still a matter of debate whether the first carved images in India were created by the Buddhist, the Jains, the Ajivikas, the Hindus or the animist worshippers of *naga* and *yaksha* cults. It is also a matter of debate which group first created stone temples. See Himanshu Prabha Ray, 'The Apsidal Shrine in Early Hinduism: Origins, Cultic Affiliation, Patronage', *World Archaeology* Vol. 36, No. 3 (2010), pp. 343–59. See Chapter 2 below for *naga* and *yaksha* cults.

73 *Atanatiya Sutta*, quoted by Robert DeCaroli, *Haunting the Buddha: Indian Popular Religions and the Formation of Buddhism* (Oxford, 2004), p. 123.

74 This world was ruled by royally attired *yaksha* rajas who could be persuaded to act as guardians of Buddhist monasteries if properly honoured. In one text, 'gods and *nagas* [snake deities] and *yakshas* … devoted to the Buddha' are said to protect his monasteries from the appetites of the wandering, malevolent 'hungry ghosts' who wished to enter. For each *yaksha* raja, there is a *yakshi* standing with perfect poise, as gorgeous as the *yaksha* is robust. DeCaroli, *Haunting the Buddha*, p. 82; John Guy, 'Celebrating the Buddha in Early Southern India', in Guy (ed.), *Tree & Serpent*, pp. 88–95.

75 They were honoured most extravagantly in the south of India, where their cults became especially well integrated into the life and worship of Buddhist monasteries.

76 Vincent Tournier, 'Buddhist Patronage and Monastic Institutions in Āndhra: Epigraphic Evidence', in Guy (ed.), *Tree & Serpent*, pp. 123–8 at p. 125; Fogelin, *An Archaeological History of Indian Buddhism*, p. 28; Ray, *Monastery and Guild*; Ray, *Archaeology and Buddhism in South Asia*, pp. 32–4.

77 Brancaccio, *The Buddhist Caves at Aurangabad*, p. 84.

78 Gregory Schopen, 'The Business Side of a Buddhist Monastery', in Guy (ed.), *Tree & Serpent*, pp. 118–22 at p. 119.

79 Gregory Schopen is the scholar who has done most to open up the daily reality, and particularly the business life, of the Buddhist monks who built the early cave monasteries of the Deccan. He has apparently never been to India, but his brilliant essays, based on close study of the published inscriptions at the early Buddhist sites, have arguably altered our understanding of the early Buddhist world more than any other scholar since James Ferguson in the nineteenth century. Schopen is a witty as well as a scholarly writer, and he delights in showing how readily scholars of Buddhism have been apt to romanticise their subject, relying on Buddhist texts that often date in their current form from many centuries after the early monasteries: most of the text we use to study Buddhism today 'may not even have been known to the vast majority of practicing Buddhists – both monks and laity'.

Schopen shows how the inscriptions left at Buddhist sites tend to record a far less idealised picture of life in early Buddhist India than the later documents which have been the foundational texts of Buddhist scholarship. He points out for example that Buddhist monks, far from being the otherworldly creatures often imagined by western scholars, were frequently extremely worldly and 'men of considerable wealth', running businesses and mints; many were clearly sleeping around, lending money and writing treatises on such unexpected subjects as inheritance law, medicine and eroticism; some were even getting into sectarian fights, hoarding weapons, destroying the stupas of rival orders and abusing and occasionally trying to murder nuns. They were, in other words, not saints but normal human beings. Schopen's essays are collected in four volumes: *Bones, Stones and Buddhist Monks*; *Buddhist Monks and Business Matters: Still More Papers on Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu, 2004); *Figments and Fragments of Mahayana Buddhism in India: More Collected Papers* (Honolulu, 2005); and *Buddhist Nuns, Monks, and Other Worldly Matters.*

80 That it is surprising to us shows how Buddhism has been presented to the west through a series of modern filters: Protestant presuppositions of the 1820s (pure and austere Buddhists vs. degenerate 'papist' Hindus), Pan-Asian idealisms of the 1890s; New Age prisms in the 1900s west and so on.

81 Joel Tatelman, *The Heavenly Exploits: Buddhist Biographies from the Dívyavadána* (New York, 2005).

82 Neelis, *Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks*, pp. 31–8; John Miksic, *Borobudur: Golden Tales of the Buddha* (Hong Kong, 1990). According to Elverskog, the *Sardulakarnavadana* notes that the Magadan weight, the mashaka, is equal to twelve grains of gold. Ray, *Archaeology and Buddhism in South Asia*, p. 63.

83 Johan Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road* (Philadelphia, 2010), p. 18; Elverskog, *The Buddha's Footprint*, p. 19; Himanshu Prabha Ray, *Winds of Change: Buddhism and the Maritime Links of Early South Asia* (Delhi, 1994), p. 122; Xinru Liu, *Ancient India and Ancient China: Trade and Religious Exchange, ad 1–600* (Oxford, 1988), p. 162; Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (London, 2015), p. 30.

84 Ray, *Winds of Change*, p. 126, cites a survey of the social composition of early Buddhist monks and nuns based on biographical details revealed by inscriptions. Two-thirds came from large towns, 40 per cent were from Brahamana backgrounds, 22 per cent were Kshatriyas: 'thus nearly half the early members of the Sangha came from powerful and wealthy families'. See also Greg Bailey and Ian Mabbett, *The Sociology of Early Buddhism* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 17; Guy, 'Early Buddhist Landscape of Southern India', p. 24.

85 Bopearachchi, *Indian Ocean Trade through Buddhist Iconographies*, p. 245.

86 Ibid.

87 David Parkin and Ruth Barnes, *Ships and the Development of Maritime Technology in the Indian Ocean* (London, 2002), p. 86.

88 Elverskog, *The Buddha's Footprint*, p. 18; Patrick Olivelle (ed. and trans.), *Dharmasūtras: The Law Codes of Āpastamba, Gautama, Baudhāyana, and Vasiṣṭha* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 105, 168; Ray, *Winds of Change*, p. 126; Ray, *Monastery and Guild*, p. 202; Fogelin, *An Archaeological History of Indian Buddhism*, p. 108.

89 Brancaccio, *The Buddhist Caves at Aurangabad*; Bart Dessein, 'The First Turning of the Wheel of Doctrine – Sarvāstivāda and Mahāsāṃghika Controversy', in Heirman and Bumbacher (eds), *The Spread of Buddhism*, p. 34.

90 Dehejia, *Indian Art*, p. 57. Kasper Grønlund Evers, *Worlds Apart Trading Together: The Organisation of Long-Distance Trade between Rome and India in Antiquity* (Oxford, 2017), pp. 150–8.

91 Guy, 'Celebrating the Buddha in Early Southern India', p. 89. Pia Brancaccio has argued in a still unpublished paper given at the 'Tree & Serpent' Symposium held in the Metropolitan Museum in New York in September 2023 that the monastic complexes of Kanheri and Sopara, both now marooned in suburban Mumbai, were once deliberately situated so as to be visible to incoming shipping using the natural deep-water harbour of Mumbai, and so to attract 'the patronage base, long-distance reach and key involvement in transregional Buddhist networks' of incoming merchants.

92 Pia Brancaccio, 'The Silk Road and the Cotton Road: Buddhist Art and Practice between Central Asia and the Western Deccan', in Bruno Genito and Lucia Caterina (eds), *Archeologia delle Vie della Seta: Percorsi, immagini e cultura materiale*, 4 vols (Rome, 2017), Vol. 2, pp. 59–77 at p. 61.

93 Ray, *Monastery and Guild*, pp. 60–1, counts as many as 530 early Buddhist caves in the vicinity of Bombay. Brancaccio, *The Buddhist Caves at Aurangabad*, p. 76; Ray, *Archaeology and Buddhism in South Asia*, p. 35.

94 Himanshu Prabha Ray, 'Ethnographies of Sailing: From the Red Sea to the Bay of Bengal in Antiquity', in Cobb (ed.), *The Indian Ocean Trade in Antiquity*, pp. 73–94 at p. 74; Bopearachchi, *Indian Ocean Trade through Buddhist Iconographies*, p. 249; Brancaccio, 'The Silk Road and the Cotton Road'.

95 Guy, 'Celebrating the Buddha in Early Southern India', p. 89. In a still-unpublished paper given at the 'Tree & Serpent' Symposium held in the Metropolitan Museum in New York in September 2023, 'Early Historic Āndhra: Coast–Interior Association and the Buddhist Patronage Network', Suchandra Ghosh used epigraphic evidence to show how the *navika* merchant mariners of the Andhra Buddhist community were related through family networks to the prosperous *gahapati* farmers of the interior who were major investors in both long-distance trade and coastal monastic complexes. She also pointed to art historical links between the Andhra coast and South-east Asia, which seem to have followed the same networks, and she points out that the icon of the Amaravati standing Buddha, with his cloth robe thrown over the body leaving the shoulder bare, is also found in Thailand. There are parallels as well between the Thai stone *chakras* on columns from Dvaravarti and those on the drum of the stupa at Amaravati.

96 Thapar, 'Early Mediterranean Contacts with India', p. 34.

97 Rosa Maria Cimino, *Ancient Rome and India: Commercial and Cultural Contacts between the Roman World and India* (New Delhi, 1994), p. 71.

98 Fogelin, *An Archaeological History of Indian Buddhism*, p. 127; Ray, *The Archaeology of Seafaring in Ancient South Asia*, pp. 259, 263; David Abulafia, *The Boundless Sea: A Human History of the Oceans* (London, 2019), pp. 115–16; Erik Seldeslachts, 'Greece, the Final Frontier? The Western Spread of Buddhism', in Heirman and Bumbacher (eds), *The Spread of Buddhism*, p. 147; Evers, *Worlds Apart Trading Together*, pp. 158–63; Dehejia, *Indian Art*, p. 111; Ray, *Monastery and Guild*, pp. 194–6; Grant Parker, *The Making of Roman India* (Cambridge, 2008), p. 173.

99 Warwick Ball, *Rome in the East: The Transformation of an Empire* (London, 2016), pp. 126–7, 144.

100 Ghosh, *From the Oxus to the Indus*, pp. 101–17; Ball, *Rome in the East*, pp. 144–5.

101 Raoul John McLaughlin, 'Indian Ocean Commerce in Context: The Economic and Revenue Significance of Eastern Trade in the Ancient World Economy', in Cobb (ed.), *The Indian Ocean Trade in Antiquity*, p. 125.

102 Roberta Tomber, *Indo-Roman Trade: From Pots to Pepper* (London, 2008), pp. 30–7; Raoul McLaughlin, *The Roman Empire and the Indian Ocean: The Ancient World Economy and the Kingdoms of Africa, Arabia and India* (Barnsley, 2014), p. 344; Laura R. Weinstein, 'The Indian Figurine from Pompeii as an Emblem of East–West Trade in the Early Roman Imperial Era', in Autiero and Cobb (eds), *Globalization and Transculturality from Antiquity to the Pre-Modern World*, pp. 183–204 at p. 192.

103 Brancaccio, *The Buddhist Caves at Aurangabad*, pp. 61, 87; Thapar, 'Early Mediterranean Contacts with India', p. 17; Evers, *Worlds Apart Trading Together*, p. 150.

104 Ray, *Monastery and Guild*, p. 208; Fogelin, *An Archaeological History of Indian Buddhism*, pp. 108, 126–7, Ray, *Archaeology and Buddhism in South Asia*, pp. 32–3.

2: India: 'The Sink of the World's Most Precious Metals'

1 The closest resemblance of all is probably to the Palmyran solar deitiy, who also shares the Berenike Buddhas' snail curls and overall face shape.

2 Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 1380. See Grant Parker, *The Making of Roman India* (Cambridge, 2008), p. 300.

3 The inscription has parallels in orthography and language with others from third century Gujarat. An alternative reading could be 'Vasulena, a merchant of kshatriya caste'. Personal communications with Steve Sidebotham, Marianne Bergmann, Shailen Bhandare and Peter Stewart. Shailen Bhandare says the closest comparisons he can find to the triad of gods are on coins from Mathura that he tentatively dates the stele to between 50 and 150 CE.

4 Timothy Power, *The Red Sea from Byzantium to the Caliphate, ad 500–1000* (Cairo, 2012), p. 39.

5 Roberta Tomber, *Indo-Roman Trade: From Pots to Pepper* (London, 2008), p. 153; Thomas McEvilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought: Comparative Studies in Greek and Indian Philosophies* (New York, 2002), p. 383; Matthew Adam Cobb, *Rome and the Indian Ocean Trade from Augustus to the Early Third Century* (Leiden, 2018), pp. 153, 225; Sureshkumar Muthukumaran, *The Tropical Turn: Agricultural Innovation in the Ancient Middle East and the Mediterranean* (Oakland, 2023), pp. 62–3 and 104, notes how wide the specifically Tamil trading networks were at this time (see Introduction, note 16). See also Sureshkumar Muthukumaran, 'The Tamil Diaspora in Pre-Modern Southeast Asia: A Longue Durée Narrative', in Arun Mahizhnan and Nalini Gopal (eds), *Sojourners to Settlers: Tamils in Southeast Asia* (Singapore, 2019), Vol. 1, pp. 26–44 at p. 29 and Jo Marchant, 'A Buried Ancient Egyptian Port Reveals the Hidden Connections Between Distant Civilizations', *Smithsonian Magazine*, July/August 2024.

6 Conversation with P. J. Cherian, the excavator of Pattinam/Muziris, All Souls, Oxford, April 2024. See P. J. Cherian, *Interim Report of the Pattinam Excavations/Explorations* (Thuruvananthapuram, 2013), and P. J. Cherian, *Unearthing Pattinam: Histories, Cultures, Crossings* (New Delhi, 2014).

7 Raoul John McLaughlin, 'Indian Ocean Commerce in Context: The Economic and Revenue Significance of Eastern Trade in the Ancient World', in Matthew Adam Cobb (ed.), *The Indian Ocean Trade in Antiquity: Political, Cultural and Economic Impacts* (Oxford, 2019), pp. 117–34 at pp. 122, 125. McLaughlin has a lot of very involved calculations to build the claim made here, as I discuss below. A more cautious estimate by Andrew Wilson in his 2014 *Cambridge Companion to the Roman Economy* essay is that the quarter tax on the Red Sea ships amounted to a third of the annual cost of the army. See below note 13.

8 William Dalrymple, *From the Holy Mountain: A Journey in the Shadow of Byzantium* (London, 1998), p.

387.

9 The exact provenance of the Muziris Papyrus is uncertain and the link with Oxyrhynchus, though possible is far from proven.

10 A Roman sesterce, worth a quarter of a denarius, would be worth around $1 today.

11 Gospel of John, 12: 3–5. Ernst Emanuel Mayer comments, 'If the story were true, the spikenard that Mary used thus would have cost the equivalent of a legionary's annual salary.' Ernst Emanuel Mayer, 'Tanti non emo, Sexte, Piper: Pepper Prices, Roman Consumer Culture, and the Bulk of Indo-Roman Trade', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* Vol. 61, No. 4 (2018), pp. 560–89 at p. 573.

12 McLaughlin, 'Indian Ocean Commerce in Context', pp. 122–5. Gary K. Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade: International Commerce and Imperial Policy, 31 bc–ad 305* (London, 2001), p. 15.

13 Federico De Romanis, *The Indo-Roman Pepper Trade and the Muziris Papyrus* (Oxford, 2020); Himanshu Prabha Ray, *The Archaeology of Seafaring in Ancient South Asia* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 231. Kasper Grønlund Evers, *Worlds Apart Trading Together: The Organisation of Long-Distance Trade between Rome and India in Antiquity* (Oxford, 2017), pp. 45,78, 97–116, 171.

14 Cobb, *Rome and the Indian Ocean Trade from Augustus to the Early Third Century*, p. 85.

15 Raoul McLaughlin, *The Roman Empire and the Indian Ocean: The Ancient World Economy and the Kingdoms of Africa, Arabia and India* (Barnsley, 2014).

16 See also Mayer, 'Tanti non emo, Sexte, Piper', pp. 560–89; David Peacock and Lucy Blue (eds), *Myos Hormos – Quseir al-Qadim: Roman and Islamic Ports on the Red Sea*, Vol. 2: *Finds from the Excavations, 1999–2003* (Oxford, 2011).

17 James W. Lankton, 'From Regional to Global: Early Glass and the Development of the Maritime Silk Road', in Franck Billé, Sanjyot Mehendale and James W. Lankton (eds), *The Maritime Silk Road: Global Connectivities, Regional Nodes, Localities* (Amsterdam, 2022), pp. 71–94 at p. 73. At the very earliest period, some of this trade may have taken the form of down-the-line barter rather than individual voyages.

18 Muthukumaran, *The Tropical Turn*, pp. 28, 30–1, 37.

19 Ibid., p. 32; Abulafia, *The Boundless Sea*, p. 62.

20 Muthukumaran, *The Tropical Turn*, pp. 32–3, 39.

21 Romila Thapar, *Early India: From the Origins to ad 1300* (London, 2002); Romila Thapar, *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (Oxford, 1997), p. 285; Sanjeev Sanyal, *The Ocean of Churn: How the Indian Ocean Shaped Human History* (New Delhi, 2016), p. 53; Abulafia, *The Boundless Sea*, p. 62; Frederick M. Asher, 'India Abroad: Evidence for Ancient Indian Maritime Activity', in Cobb (ed.), *The Indian Ocean Trade in Antiquity*, pp. 157–67 at p. 157.

22 Muthukumaran, *The Tropical Turn*, p. 43.

23 Mayer, 'Tanti non emo, Sexte, Piper', p. 562; G. Possehl, 'Meluhha', in Julian Reade (ed.), *The Indian Ocean in Antiquity* (London, 1996), pp. 133–208; Muthukumaran, *The Tropical Turn*, p. 37.

24 Muthukumaran, *The Tropical Turn*, p. 29. 'The molecular biologist Henryk Witas and colleagues examined mitochondrial DNA sequences extracted from the dental remains of four individuals, two from Early (c. 2650–2450 bce) and Middle (2200–1900 bce) Bronze Age Terqa in Syria and two from Roman (200–300 ce) and late antique (500–700 ce) Tell Masaikh in Syria. All four individuals carried mitochondrial DNA haplotypes belonging to the M4b1, M49, and/or M61 haplogroups, which are absent in modern Syria but found in Trans-Himalayan and South Asian populations. Haplogroup M lineages are believed to have diversified in the Indian subcontinent between 5,800 and 2,500 years ago.' Witas believed the bones to be those of itinerant Indian merchants. Sureshkumar Muthukumaran thinks they could be 'evidence of an early migration from the east'.

25 Ibid., p. 47. For more on the early history of Indian diamonds and their export to the west, see William Dalrymple and Anita Anand, *Koh-i-Noor* (London, 2017). For pepper up the nose of Ramses, cassia blossom to be precise, see Evers, *Worlds Apart Trading Together*, p. 83.

26 Cyprian Broodbank, *The Making of the Middle Sea: A History of the Mediterranean from the Beginning to the Emergence of the Classical World* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 333, 337; Susan Whitfield, *Silk, Slaves, and Stupas: The Material Culture of the Silk Road* (Berkeley, 2018), p. 52; Richard Stoneman, *The Greek Experience of India: From Alexander to the Indo-Greeks* (Princeton, 2019), p. 117.

27 Himanshu Prabha Ray, *Coastal Shrines and Transnational Maritime Networks across India and Southeast Asia* (London, 2020), p. 72; Berenice Bellina and Ian Glover, 'The Archaeology of Early Contact with

India and the Mediterranean World, from the Fourth Century BC to the Fourth Century AD', pp. 68–85, and Pierre-Yves Manguin, 'The Archaeology of Early Maritime Polities of Southeast Asia', pp. 288–9, both in Ian Glover and Peter Bellwood (eds), *Southeast Asia: From Prehistory to History* (London, 2014); Tansen Sen, 'Buddhism and Maritime Crossings', in Dorothy C. Wong and Gustav Heldt (eds), *China and Beyond in the Mediaeval Period: Cultural Crossings and Inter-Regional Connections* (Amherst, 2014), pp. 39–62.

28 Kenneth R. Hall, 'Economic History of Early Southeast Asia', in Nicholas Tarling (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, Vol. 1, Part One: *From Early Times to c.1500* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 183–275 at pp. 184–5.

29 Lankton, 'From Regional to Global', pp. 80–2. Lankton emphasises the importance of the early Thai ports at Khao Sam Kaeo and Khao Sek on the Isthmus of Kra. George Coedès, *The Indianised States of Southeast Asia* (Honolulu, 1964), pp. 20–1.

30 Giorgios T. Halkias, 'When the Greeks Converted the Buddha: Asymmetrical Transfers of Knowledge in Indo-Greek Cultures', in Peter Wick and Volker Rabens (eds), *Religions and Trade: Religious Formation, Transformation and Cross-Cultural Exchange between East and West* (Leiden, 2014), pp. 65–116, esp. pp. 66–7; Abulafia, *The Boundless Sea*, p. 88.

31 Muthukumaran, *The Tropical Turn*, pp. 50–5, 60.

32 Muthukumaran, 'The Tamil Diaspora in Pre-Modern Southeast Asia', p. 26.

33 Cobb, *Rome and the Indian Ocean Trade from Augustus to the Early Third Century*, p. 59.

34 McEvilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought*, p. 383; Warwick Ball, *Rome in the East: The Transformation of an Empire* (London, 2016), p. 454.

35 Cobb, *Rome and the Indian Ocean Trade from Augustus to the Early Third Century*, p. 37.

36 Jack Turner, *Spice: The History of a Temptation* (London, 2004), p. 62; Abulafia, *The Boundless Sea*, p. 97; McLaughlin, *The Roman Empire and the Silk Routes*, p. xviii; Muthukumaran, *The Tropical Turn*, p. 60.

37 Abulafia, *The Boundless Sea*, p. 90; Romila Thapar, 'Early Mediterranean Contacts with India: An Overview', in Federico De Romanis and André Tchernia (eds), *Crossings: Early Mediterranean Contacts with India* (New Delhi, 2005), p. 25; Lionel Casson (ed. and trans.), *The Periplus Maris Erythraei* (Princeton, 1989), 57, p. 87, quoted in Christoph Baumer, *The History of Central Asia*, Vol. 2: *The Age of the Silk Roads* (London, 2014), p. 55.

38 Parker, *The Making of Roman India*, p. 179; Troy Wilkinson, 'Oikumenisation and the Ptolemaic Beginnings of the Indian Ocean Trade', in Serena Autiero and Matthew A. Cobb (eds), *Globalization and Transculturality from Antiquity to the Pre-Modern World* (Oxford, 2022), p. 144; Evers, *Worlds Apart Trading Together*, pp. 140–1; Turner, *Spice*, p. 59.

39 McEvilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought*, p. 384; Muthukumaran, 'The Tamil Diaspora in Pre-Modern Southeast Asia', p. 28.

40 Himanshu Prabha Ray, *Winds of Change: Buddhism and the Maritime Links of Early South Asia* (Delhi, 1994), p. 175; Ball, *Rome in the East*, p. 150; Cobb, *Rome and the Indian Ocean Trade from Augustus to the Early Third Century*, p. 151.

41 Rosa Maria Cimino, *Ancient Rome and India: Commercial and Cultural Contacts between the Roman World and India* (New Delhi, 1994), pp. 38–9. For the ships depicted in Ajanta see Jun Kimura, 'Archaeological Evidence of Shipping and Shipbuilding along the Maritime Silk Road', in Billé, Mehendale and Lankton (eds), *The Maritime Silk Road*, pp. 97–125.

42 Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade*, pp. 51–2, 62, 72–5. The authors Young quotes are Dio Chrysostom and Xenophon of Ephesus. Evers, *Worlds Apart Trading Together*, p. 90; Cobb, *Rome and the Indian Ocean Trade from Augustus to the Early Third Century*, p. 154.

43 See Penn, T., Russell, B., and Wilson, A. I., 'On the Roman-Byzantine adoption of the stirrup once more: a new find from seventh-century Aphrodisias', *Anatolian Studies* 71 (2021), pp. 129–39.

44 Evers, *Worlds Apart Trading Together*, pp. 23–47; Abulafia, *The Boundless Sea*, p. 99; Parker, *The Making of Roman India*, p. 179.

45 Cobb, *Rome and the Indian Ocean Trade from Augustus to the Early Third Century*, pp. 204, 208.

46 Doris Srinivasan advances a compelling case for the celebrated Didarganj *yakshi*, now in the Patna Museum, actually representing a figure of a courtesan (or Gaik). The same may well hold true for this ivory figurine. See Doris Meth Srinavasan, 'The Mauryan Gaṇikā from Dīdārgañj (Pāṭaliputra)', *East and West* Vol. 55, No. 1/4 (December 2005), pp. 345–62.

47 Most Roman elephants came from Morocco and Libya before the population there was hunted to

extinction. The ivory itself was found in Casa della Statuette Indiana or the House of the Indian Statuette in Regio I (I, 8.5). Cobb, *Rome and the Indian Ocean Trade from Augustus to the Early Third Century*, p. 188. Laura R. Weinstein, 'The Indian Figurine from Pompeii as an Emblem of East–West Trade in the Early Roman Imperial Era', in Autiero and Cobb (eds), *Globalization and Transculturality from Antiquity to the Pre-Modern World*, pp. 183–204 at p. 188.

48 Abulafia, *The Boundless Sea*, p. 111; Federico De Romanis, 'Rome and the *Nótia* of India: Relations between Rome and Southern India from 30 bc to the Flavian Period', in De Romanis and Tchernia (eds), *Crossings*, p. 82; Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade*, p. 62.

49 Steven E. Sidebotham, *Berenike and the Ancient Maritime Spice Route* (Berkeley, 2012); Tomber, *Indo-Roman Trade*; Philippe Beaujard, *The Worlds of the Indian Ocean*, Vol. 1: *From the Fourth Millennium bce to the Sixth Century ce* (Cambridge, 2009); McLaughlin, 'Indian Ocean Commerce in Context', p. 214.

50 Evers, *Worlds Apart Trading Together*, p. 73; Turner, *Spice*, pp. 57–8. A little later, also in Northumbria, pepper was one of the Venerable Bede's few possessions when he died: https://www.caitlingreen.org/2019/04/king-alfred-and-india.html. Ernst Emanuel Mayer comments, 'We cannot know whether [Gambax's] two denarii bought him a *selibra* or *c*. 160g of black pepper at the Empire's Scottish frontier; but the fact that a common Roman soldier could get his hands on a small amount of Indian spice in Northern Britain is remarkable, and attests not only to the wide availability but also to the affordability of pepper.' See Mayer, 'Tanti non emo, Sexte, Piper', p. 566. Muthukumaran, *The Tropical Turn*, p. 62.

51 Cobb, *Rome and the Indian Ocean Trade from Augustus to the Early Third Century*, p. 204.

52 Ibid., p. 187.

53 Evers, *Worlds Apart Trading Together*, p. 5; Vimala Begley, 'Arikamedu Reconsidered', *American Journal of Archaeology* Vol. 87, No. 4 (1983), pp. 461–81; Cobb, *Rome and the Indian Ocean Trade from Augustus to the Early Third Century*, pp. 6, 22, 66, 69, 90, 304; Cobb (ed.), *The Indian Ocean Trade in Antiquity*, pp. 30–1; Mayer, 'Tanti non emo, Sexte, Piper', p. 562.

54 Asher, 'India abroad', pp. 151, 158; Abulafia, *The Boundless Sea*, p. 128; Ingo Strauch, *Foreign Sailors on Socotra* (Bremen, 2012); Tomber, *Indo-Roman Trade*, p. 108; Himanshu Prabha Ray, *Monastery and Guild: Commerce under the Satavahanas* (Delhi, 1986), pp. 2–3; Cobb, *Rome and the Indian Ocean Trade from Augustus to the Early Third Century*, pp. 150–1.

55 Parker, *The Making of Roman India*, p. 173; Cobb, *Rome and the Indian Ocean Trade from Augustus to the Early Third Century*, p. 80.

56 Pliny, *Naturalis Historia*, trans. J. André et al. (Paris, 1947–2015), Vol. XII, p. 29.

57 See the discussion in Ray, *The Archaeology of Seafaring in Ancient South Asia*, p. 170; Abulafia, *The Boundless Sea*, p. 109; Christian Robin, 'The Date of the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* in the Light of South Arabian Evidence', in De Romanis and Tchernia (eds), *Crossings*, p. 46; De Romanis, 'Rome and the *Nótia* of India', pp. 84–5, 97; Evers, *Worlds Apart Trading Together*, pp. 52, 68.

58 De Romanis, 'Rome and the *Nótia* of India', p. 96; Ray, *Monastery and Guild*, pp. 9, 146; Tomber, *Indo-Roman Trade*, p. 25; Muthukumaran, *The Tropical Turn*, p. 62 n. 266; Muthukumaran, 'The Tamil Diaspora in Pre-Modern Southeast Asia', p. 28.

59 André Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, Vol. 1: *Early Medieval India and the Expansion of Islam, 7th–11th Centuries* (Leiden, 2002), pp. 336–7; Paul Michel Munoz, *Early Kingdoms: The Indonesian Archipelago and the Malay Peninsula* (Singapore, 2006), p. 54.

60 McLaughlin, *The Roman Empire and the Indian Ocean*. The text is sufficiently late to be describing late Roman or even Byzantine contact.

61 Begley, 'Arikamedu Reconsidered'; Thapar, 'Early Mediterranean Contacts with India', p. 36; De Romanis, 'Rome and the *Nótia* of India', p. 116; Evers, *Worlds Apart Trading Together*, pp. 1, 5, 165; Tomber, *Indo-Roman Trade*, pp. 144, 132–4; Lars Fogelin, *An Archaeological History of Indian Buddhism* (Oxford, 2015), p. 21; Ball, *Rome in the East*, p. 150.

62 Cobb, *Rome and the Indian Ocean Trade from Augustus to the Early Third Century*, pp. 49–51.

63 Sunil Gupta, 'Archaeology of Globalization: A Restrospective View of the Indian Ocean World and Implications for the Present (500 bce–300 ce)', in Autiero and Cobb (eds), *Globalization and Transculturality from Antiquity to the Pre-Modern World*, p. 138; Cobb, *Rome and the Indian Ocean Trade from Augustus to the Early Third Century*, p. 237.

64 Casson (ed. and trans.), *The Periplus Maris Erythraei*; Pia Brancaccio, *The Buddhist Caves at Aurangabad: Transformations in Art and Religion* (Leiden, 2011), p. 86; Tomber, *Indo-Roman Trade*, p.

153; Strauch, *Foreign Sailors on Socotra*, p. 368.

65 Robert Knox, *Amaravati: Buddhist Sculpture from the Great Stupa* (London, 1992), pp. 10–11; André Tchernia, 'The Dromedary of the Peticii and Trade with the East', in De Romanis and Tchernia (eds), *Crossings*, p. 239; Brancaccio, *The Buddhist Caves at Aurangabad*, p. 53.

66 Many of the sculptures of Amaravati are now in the British Museum in London, but those showing the Ethiopian envoys are in the Chennai Government Museum, although very poorly displayed after being kept in storage for seventy years and only placed on public view in 2018. I don't believe these images of envoys from Axum have previously been identified or published. For the Kushan coins in Ethiopia, see Strauch, *Foreign Sailors on Socotra*, p. 375. Evers, *Worlds Apart Trading Together*, pp. 124–6; Brancaccio, *The Buddhist Caves at Aurangabad*, p. 53; Whitfield, *Silk, Slaves, and Stupas*, pp. 57–80. For Axum see the brilliant G. W. Bowersock, *The Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam* (Oxford, 2013). Also Parker, *The Making of Roman India*, pp. 182–3; Strauch, *Foreign Sailors on Socotra*, p. 375.

67 Ray, *The Archaeology of Seafaring in Ancient South Asia*, pp. 206–7; Evers, *Worlds Apart Trading Together*, pp. 165–6. In the Musée Guimet in Paris there is a shard of an amphora found at Arikamedu that once contained wine from Arezzo. Mayer, 'Tanti non emo, Sexte, Piper', p. 577; Upinder Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the Twelfth Century* (New Delhi, 2009), pp. 412–17; C. Marganadhu, 'Trade Contacts between Western India and the Graeco-Roman World in the Early Centuries of the Christian Era', *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient* Vol. 8, No. 3 (1965), pp. 316–22.

68 McEvilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought*, p. 380.

69 Erik Seldeslachts, 'Greece, the Final Frontier? The Western Spread of Buddhism', in Ann Heirman and Stephan Peter Bumbacher (eds), *The Spread of Buddhism* (Leiden, 2012), p. 149.

70 It is also possible that a common (Indo-European?) ancestry lies behind some of the commonalities between Aesop and the Jatakas. It is clear after all that some of the Jatakas come from a non-Buddhist narrative tradition. Zacharias P. Thundy, *Buddha and Christ: Nativity Stories and Indian Traditions* (Leiden, 1992), pp. 259–63. The name Joasaph is a corruption of the word Bodhisattva. Ball, *Rome in the East*, p. 455; Donald S. Lopez Jr, *From Stone to Flesh: A Short History of the Buddha* (Chicago, 2013), pp. 22–3, 29. Christoper Beckwith goes further and has argued that the 'gymnosophists' whom Pyrrho met with were practitioners of an early variety of Buddhism and that the philosophy that Pyrrho began teaching after his return to Greece had been decisively influenced by what he experienced among the Gandhara philosophers. See Christopher I. Beckwith, *Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia* (Princeton, 2015). For 'The Plovers' *see* Muthukumaran, *The Tropical Turn*, p. 59.

71 Paul Gregorios, 'The Monastic Tradition', in Sarayu Doshi (ed.), *India and Greece: Connections and Parallels* (Bombay, 1985), pp. 29–34. Seldeslachts's 'Greece, the Final Frontier?' gives a number of intriguing examples of possible Buddhist thought on Greek, Roman and Byzantine thinkers. See also Thundy, *Buddha and Christ.*

72 Evers, *Worlds Apart Trading Together*, p. 165; Turner, *Spice*, p. 64; Cobb, *Rome and the Indian Ocean Trade from Augustus to the Early Third Century*, p. 158.

73 A. F. J. Klinj, *The Acts of Thomas* (Leiden, 1962), 1:1; Lopez, *From Stone to Flesh*, p. 64; Cobb, *Rome and the Indian Ocean Trade from Augustus to the Early Third Century*, p. 165.

74 Parker, *The Making of Roman India*, p. 298.

75 There is a good discussion on Indian import of slaves from Rome in Nathanael J. Andrade, *The Journey of Christianity to India in Late Antiquity: Networks and Movement of Culture* (Cambridge, 2018), p. 217.

76 Christoph Baumer, *The Church of the East: An Illustrated History of Assyrian Christianity*. (London, 2006), pp. 25–7; Klinj, *The Acts of Thomas*, 1:1; Lopez, *From Stone to Flesh*, p. 64; Cobb, *Rome and the Indian Ocean Trade from Augustus to the Early Third Century*, p. 165; Parker, *The Making of Roman India*, p. 195.

77 Baumer, *The Church of the East*, pp. 26–8; Ball, *Rome in the East*, p. 147; Parker, *The Making of Roman India*, p. 299; George Menachery, *Thomapedia* (Ollur, 2000); Andrade, *The Journey of Christianity to India in Late Antiquity*, p. 218.

78 Meera Abraham, *Two Medieval Merchant Guilds of South India* (Old Delhi, 1988), p. 15.

79 'The tomb of the apostle Thomas … [I]n that region of India where he had first been buried there are a monastery and a church that is spectacularly large and carefully decorated and constructed. In

this church God revealed a great miracle. A lamp was placed there in front of the spot where he had been buried. Once lit, by divine command it burned without ceasing, day and night: no one offered the assistance of oil or a new wick. No wind blew it out, no accident extinguished it, and its brightness did not diminish. The lamp continues to burn because of the power of the apostle that is unfamiliar to men but is nevertheless associated with divine power. Theodorus, who visited the spot, told this to me.' R. Van Dam (trans.), *Gregory of Tours: Glory of the Martyrs* (Liverpool, 1988), p. 51. See also Andrade, *The Journey of Christianity to India in Late Antiquity*, p. 218.

80 William Dalrymple, 'The Incredible Journey: Did St Thomas found a church in south India?', *Guardian*, 15 April 2000. St Thomas was recorded as martyred in India in the *Old English Martyrology*, as well as in the poems of Aldhelm, Alfred's favourite English poet. Dr Caitlin R. Green is currently writing an article on the reference to St Thomas in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and at the time of writing her interim findings are online in her blog. She mentions several other very early references to a flourishing Christian community in India, such as a reference in the *Chronicles of Se'ert* to the Bishop of Rev-Ardashir at Fars in Persia sending materials for the use of Indian Christians in c.470. In India itself can be found copperplate grants to the Indian Christians dating as far back as 849 ce. The witnesses to the grants sign in Pahlavi, Kufic and Hebrew scripts. See https://www.caitlingreen.org/2019/04/king-alfred-and-india.html.

3: The Great King, King of Kings, Son of God

1 Philippe Marquis et al., *Recent Archaeological Work in Afghanistan: Preliminary Studies on Mes Aynak Excavations and Other Field Works* (Kabul, 2013); Christoph Baumer, *The History of Central Asia*, Vol. 2: *The Age of the Silk Roads* (London, 2014), p. 75.

2 Personal communication with Philippe Marquis. See also Deborah Klimburg-Salter, 'Contextualising Mes Aynak', *Afghanistan* Vol. 1, No. 2 (2018), pp. 213–38; William Dalrymple, 'Mes Aynak: Afghanistan's Buddhist buried treasure faces destruction', *Guardian*, 31 May 2013.

3 Joe Cribb, 'Rediscovering the Kushans', in Vidula Jayaswal (ed.), *Glory of the Kushans: Recent Discoveries and Interpretations* (New Delhi, 2012), pp. 3–56.

4 Craig Benjamin, *Empires of Ancient Eurasia: The First Silk Roads Era, 100 bce–250 ce* (Cambridge, 2018), p. 177; Harry Falk (ed.), *Kushan Histories: Literary Sources and Selected Papers from a Symposium at Berlin, December 5 to 7, 2013* (Berlin, 2016).

5 Peter Stewart, 'Kushan Art: Iranian, Mediterranean, and Indian Connections', in Robert Bracey (ed.), *The Kushans* (forthcoming).

6 Guy Lecuyot, 'Ai Khanoum, between East and West: A Composite Architecture', in Rachel Mairs (ed.), *The Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek World* (London, 2021), pp. 539–53; Baumer, *The History of Central Asia*, Vol. 2: *The Age of the Silk Roads*, p. 47.

7 Joan Aruz and Elizabeth Valtz Fino, *Afghanistan: Forging Civilisations along the Silk Road* (New York, 2012), p. 89. Some scholars believe the occupants of Tilya Tepe to be Shaka or Indo-Parthian rather than Kushan.

8 Ibid., pp. 78–101.

9 John Boardman, *The Greeks in Asia* (London, 2015), pp. 110–13.

10 Xavier Tremblay, 'The Spread of Buddhism in Serindia', in Ann Heirman and Stephan Peter Bumbacher (eds), *The Spread of Buddhism* (Leiden, 2012), pp. 75–129, esp. p. 81.

11 Mention should also be made of the elusive Indo-Scythians who preceded the Kushans and may have laid some of groundwork when it came to lines of transit and patronage of local religions, connecting the Hindu Kush region with western India.

12 Harry Falk, 'Kushan Rule Granted by Nana: The Background of a Heavenly Legitimation', in Falk (ed.), *Kushan Histories*, pp. 265–94.

13 Gérard Fussman, 'Kushan Power and the Expansion of Buddhism beyond the Soleiman Mountains', in Falk (ed.), *Kushan Histories*, pp. 153–202, esp. p. 194. The direct role of the Kushan dynasty in patronage of Buddhism is critically questioned in this important essay. Although there is a general consensus that the Kushans were certainly important, their actual impact on the growth of Buddhism may have been exaggerated in some earlier scholarship, at the expense of pre-Kushan rulers such as the Sakas (Indo-Scythian), Indo-Parthians and other dynasties between the Indo-Greeks and Kushans, as well as regional and local intermediaries under Kushan rule who often acted as the direct patrons of

monasteries such as Mes Aynak.

14 Although there are distinctly Greek names which appear in a number of Buddhist contexts including reliquary inscriptions.

15 Thomas McEvilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought: Comparative Studies in Greek and Indian Philosophies* (New York, 2002), p. 376.

16 This assumes a late dating of the putative Menander II, and that he really is Milinda, rather than being Menander of the 2nd century bce. That's the view taken in the most recent work, by Olga Kubica, but is not by any means certain. The fact that this text is in the form of questions and answers, even if not exactly a Socratic dialogue, surely shows Greek influence, since so few other Indic texts take this form.

17 Jason Neelis, *Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks: Mobility and Exchange within and beyond the Northwestern Borderlands of South Asia* (Leiden, 2011), p. 105. Menander is now identified as Menander II Dikaios.

18 There is evidence that the settlement of Indian Buddhists had already begun under the Indo-Scythian kings like Azes, but accelerated under the Kushans.

19 Osmund Bopearachchi, 'Indian Ocean Trade through Buddhist Iconographies', in Franck Billé, Sanjyot Mehendale and James W. Lankton (eds), *The Maritime Silk Road: Global Connectivities, Regional Nodes, Localities* (Amsterdam, 2022), pp. 243–65 at p. 247.

20 McEvilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought*, pp. 372–4. Gandhara was distinctive in several ways: its texts were in the regional language, Gandhari, and written in Kharoshthi script, which was related to Aramaic and, like it, written right to left. The area became an important centre for *abhidharma* studies, an abstract and highly technical systemisation of the Buddhist doctrine which drew on Greek philosophy and which flourished among the scholar monks of Taxila. While Taxila was certainly a major centre of learning and is recognised as such in several Jataka stories, the tradition of its being a 'university town', something accepted in most secondary texts, seems to be based on fairly thin evidence.

21 Clément Huart, *Le Livre de Gerchâsp, poème persan d'Asadî junior de Toûs*, 2 vols (Paris, 1926–9), Vol. 2, p. 111, quoted by Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (London, 2015), p. 3; John M. Rosenfield, *The Dynastic Arts of the Kushans* (Berkeley, 1993).

22 Gondophares is mentioned in the dedicatory inscription of the great Gandharan Buddhist monastery of Takht-i-Bai near Peshawar.

23 The chronology is heavily contested by scholars, and the successors of Gondophares seem to have used that name as a title.

24 Osmund Bopearachchi and Wilfried Pieper, *Ancient Indian Coins* (Turnhout, 1998).

25 Benjamin, *Empires of Ancient Eurasia*, p. 185.

26 Pia Brancaccio, 'The Silk Road and the Cotton Road: Buddhist Art and Practice between Central Asia and the Western Deccan', in Bruno Genito and Lucia Caterina (eds), *Archeologia delle Vie della Seta: Percorsi, immagini e cultura materiale*, 4 vols (Rome, 2017), Vol. 2, pp. 59–77.

27 Sonya Rhie Quintanilla, *History of Early Stone Sculpture at Mathura, ca. 150 bce–100 ce* (Leiden, 2007); Himanshu Prabha Ray, *Archaeology and Buddhism in South Asia* (Oxford, 2018), p. 107; J. C. Harle, *Gupta Sculpture: Indian Sculpture of the Fourth to the Sixth Centuries ad* (Oxford, 1974), pp. 15–18.

28 Robert DeCaroli, *Image Problems: The Origin and Development of the Buddha's Image in Early South Asia* (Washington, DC, 2015), pp. 99–100.

29 Ashwini Lakshminarayanan, 'Globalization and Gandhāran Art', in Serena Autiero and Matthew A. Cobb (eds), *Globalization and Transculturality from Antiquity to the Pre-Modern World* (Oxford, 2022), pp. 226–44 at p. 228.

30 Warwick Ball, *Rome in the East: The Transformation of an Empire* (London, 2016), p. 166.

31 The Kushans were not the first to have Shiva on their coins. The Audumbara kings in Punjab call themselves devotees/followers of Mahadeva and put clear Shaivite symbols on their coins. They are about a century before the Kushans, while Shiva himself first appears on coins of the Indo-Parthian king Gondophares. Joe Cribb, 'Greekness after the End of the Bactrian and Indo-Greek Kingdoms', in Mairs (ed.), *The Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek World*, p. 672. Harry Falk disputes Vima Kadphises's attachment to Shiva and argues instead that it is Agni that is on his coins; Harry Falk, 'Kushan Religion and Politics', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* Vol. 29 (2015–19), pp. 1–55. In Vidula Jayaswal (ed.), *Glory of the Kushans: Recent Discoveries and Interpretations* (New Delhi, 2012).

32 Since the Shiva is in a vestibule, it could have been part of the approach to a different, contemporary (that is, late) cult image, possibly Hindu, which no longer survives: the Dioscuri are much earlier. Ciro Lo Muzio, *Archeologia dell'Asia Centrale Preislamica* (Milan, 2017), argues that the Shiva and Parvati are not earlier than the sixth century ce, but this may well be too late. Certainly one has to be cautious about the claim that this dates from the time of Vima – it's entirely plausible but the evidence is thin. See Tremblay, 'The Spread of Buddhism in Serindia', pp. 75–129, esp. p. 84.

33 Tremblay, 'The Spread of Buddhism in Serindia', pp. 75–129.

34 Suresh Muthukumaran, 'The Tamil Diaspora in Pre-Modern Southeast Asia: A Longue Durée Narrative', in Arun Mahizhnan and Nalini Gopal (eds), *Sojourners to Settlers: Tamils in Southeast Asia* (Singapore, 2019), Vol. 1, pp. 26–44 at p. 29.

35 The scene takes place in Drobeta, Dacia, an even longer journey for the Kushan embassy if they first went to Rome. Norman Underwood, 'Rome and its Connections with India', in John Guy (ed.), *Tree & Serpent: Early Buddhist Art in India* (New York, 2023), pp. 160–5.

36 John E. Hill, *Through the Jade Gate to Rome* (Charleston, 2009), pp. 266ff.

37 Underwood, 'Rome and its Connections with India', p. 163.

38 Harry Falk, 'Indian Gold Crossing the Indian Ocean through the Millennia', in Federico De Romanis and Marco Maiuro (eds), *Across the Ocean: Nine Essays on Indo-Mediterranean Trade* (Leiden, 2015), pp. 97–113.

39 Naman P. Ahuja, 'One Mother, Many Mother Tongues', in *Gandhara: A Confluence of Cultures*, *Marg: A Magazine of the Arts* Vol. 70, No. 4 (June 2019), pp. 32–52. See also Naman P. Ahuja, 'The British Museum Hariti: Toward Understanding Transculturism in Gandhara', in Susan E. Alcock, Mariana Egri and James F. D. Frakes (eds), *Beyond Boundaries: Connecting Visual Cultures in the Provinces of Ancient Rome* (Los Angeles, 2016), pp. 247–63. Hariti is still worshipped in the Kathmandu Valley as a protectress against smallpox, chickenpox and other similar diseases.

40 Another Harpocrates was found in Taxila, and the influence of these figures can be seen both in Mathura, where his iconography may have been grafted on to a figure identified as the shy celibate boy Brahmin hermit Rishyashringa, who appears in the *Mahabharata*, and in Gandhara, where he can be seen playing beside the *yakshi* Hariti. The figure Hariti herself has an Egyptian genesis, as Naman Ahuja has pointed out. The celebrated image of the *yakshi* now in the British Museum seems to be closely modelled on that of Isis Lactans, a figure who cast her shadow westwards as well and may have formed the basis for what became the Christian theme of the Virgin and Child, or Madonna. Ahuja, 'One Mother, Many Mother Tongues', p. 35. See also Rachel R. Mairs, 'Egyptian Artefacts from Central and South Asia', https://www.academia.edu/209814/Egyptian_Artefacts_from_Central_and_South_Asia; Peter Stewart, 'Alexandria and Gandhara: Cosmopolitan Connections and Comparisons', in Hélène Fragaki, Marie-Dominique Nenna and Miguel John Versluys (eds), *Alexandria the Cosmopolis: A Global Perspective* (Alexandria, 2022), pp. 181–96. Also William Dalrymple, 'From Berenike to Ajanta: The Romano-Egyptian Connection to the Early Buddhist Art of South and Central Asia' (forthcoming).

41 Boardman, *The Greeks in Asia*, pp. 162–3.

42 Joan Aruz and Elizabeth Valtz Fino, *Afghanistan: Forging Civilisations along the Silk Road* (New York, 2012); Ball, *Rome in the East*, p. 153.

43 *Gandhara: A Confluence of Cultures*, June 2019, p. 31.

44 Johan Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road* (Philadelphia, 2010), p. 26; Barry Cunliffe, *By Steppe, Desert, and Ocean: The Birth of Eurasia* (Oxford, 2015), p. 315.

45 Though this slightly depended on what parts of the north-west you were in. For example, Swat is sometimes different.

46 DeCaroli, *Image Problems*, pp. 95, 112–14. Sonya Rhie Quintanilla believes that a small Buddha image from a modest railing from Isapur near Mathura can be dated to 15 ce: *History of Early Stone Sculpture at Mathura*, pp. 128, 133, 205, 249–53. She dates it to the reign of the Indo-Scythian Northern Satrap, Sodasa, who ruled Mathura just before the arrival of the Kushans during the later part of the first century bce. Her work contains a fascinating discussion of the small-scale seated human images of the Buddha created in response to Ardhaphalaka Jain innovations that had a lot of prior traction in Mathura, but apparently nowhere else. Such small pre-Kushan standing Buddha images in Mathura were based on depictions of kings, sans jewels and turban.

47 This argument was first made by Ananda Coomaraswamy in 1926. See Ananda Coomaraswamy, 'The Indian Origin of the Buddha Image', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* Vol. 46 (1926), pp.

165–70.

48 Robert DeCaroli, *Haunting the Buddha: Indian Popular Religions and the Formation of Buddhism* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 62–3; DeCaroli, *Image Problems*, p. 180.

49 DeCaroli, *Image Problems*, p. 180. For example, the Bharhut stupa, from c.120 bce, was guarded by a series of nearly life-sized and individually named *yaksha* rajas. The inscriptions proclaim the monks' success in taming and converting these fierce giants to the Buddha's *dharma*. Smaller goblin-like *yakshas* with pointed ears, meanwhile, reappear as armed defenders of the court of the Indic god of riches, and as the protectors of the wealth of the earth. They take the form of the purse-bearing *yaksha* prince Kubera, often flanked by sacks of gold, and his two henchmen, Shankha and Padma. These dwarfish sidekicks, plump and squat, are shown with streams of coins cascading from their heads, symbols of the prosperity which they bestow on their most faithful devotees. See Guy (ed.), *Tree & Serpent*, especially the catalogue entries at pp. 48–52.

50 Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu, 1977), pp. 244–53; DeCaroli, *Image Problems*, pp. 171, 183–5; Lars Fogelin, *An Archaeological History of Indian Buddhism* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 156–7. Sonya Rhie Quintanilla believes that a Buddha image from a modest railing from Isapur near Mathura can be dated to 15 ce, so several decades before the Bala image. *History of Early Stone Sculpture at Mathura*, pp. 128, 133, 205, 249–53. She dates it to the reign of the Indo-Scythian Northern Satrap, Sodasa, who ruled Mathura during the later part of the first century bce.

51 The reverse has an image of a lion and a Buddhist *triratna*, or Three Jewels symbol, and a Kharoshthi inscription reading 'the Lion Who Drives Away Fear' – a reference to the Buddha's first sermon. An article on the Tilya Tepe token by Joe Cribb and Stefan Baums in the Spring 2024 issue of the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* adds significantly to the literature on this crucially important object.

52 Rather than togas, Greek *himatia* (mantles) might be a better description.

53 David L. Snellgrove, *The Image of the Buddha* (Paris, 1978), p. 63. The important development of anthropomorphic Buddha imagery in the 'drawing style' of Swat valley should also be noted as one of the first sites to move from aniconic to iconic Buddha images.

54 Although the shared iconography used for the Buddha in both regions provides strong evidence of contact and even close cooperation. For example, of the thirty-two major and eighty minor marks of the Buddha referred to in Buddhist scripture, both regions settled on using the same few in sculpture.

55 Lolita Nehru, *Origins of the Gandhāran Style: A Study of Contributory Influences* (Oxford, 1989); Madeleine Hallade, *Gandharan Art of North India and the Graeco-Buddhist Tradition in India, Persia and Central Asia* (New York, 1968).

56 Maurizio Taddei in his collection *On Gandhāra* (Naples, 2003), as well and other Italian/European archaeologists and art historians specialising in Gandhara, have emphasised quite how innovative were the narrative techniques of the Gandharan artists in the early iconic period and especially those working in the 'drawing style'.

57 Peter Stewart has argued this most convincingly. See Peter Stewart, 'Roman Sarcophagi and Gandhāran Sculpture', in Wannaporn Rienjang and Peter Stewart (eds), *The Global Connections of Gandhāran Art* (Oxford, 2020), pp. 50–85, and Stewart, 'Kushan Art'. See also Ball, *Rome in the East.*

58 Naman P. Ahuja makes a persuasive case for this in Ahuja, 'One Mother, Many Mother Tongues', pp. 44–5. He cites the work of Susan E. Alcock in *Graecia Capta: The Landscapes of Roman Greece* (Cambridge, 1993). John Boardman makes a similar point in *The Greeks in Asia*, pp. 164–7, noting that the influence reaching Gandhara was 'more of Alexandria and Aphrodisias than of Italy'. If the sculptors were fleeing Christians, this could, obviously, only be a major factor in late antique, post-Kushan Buddhist art, viz. the later phase of clay and stucco sculptures of Hadda and elsewhere in Afghanistan, a substance also popular in Coptic monasteries of the same date.

59 There are many tantalising fragments scattered around Afghanistan showing other Hindu deities, including a giant head of Durga found in Ghazni province. As late as the eleventh century, the Hindu Shahi kings of Kabul patronised a remarkable group of brick Hindu temples around what is now north-west Pakistan, many of them decorated with exquisite sculpture, particularly at the sacred centre of Hund near Attock. Here esoteric Tantric images of Vishnu, Shiva, Surya and a dancing, trunk-swaying Ganesh continue to develop the styles of Gandhara and Kashmiri art from previous centuries, but with a gorgeous new freedom, flow and musicality, full of sound and movement. See Michael Henss, 'The Hund Statues: Recent Discoveries between Gandhara and Kashmir', *Gandhara: A Confluence of Cultures*,

pp. 73–81; Suchandra Ghosh, *From the Oxus to the Indus: A Political and Cultural Study, c.300 bce to 100 bce* (New Delhi, 2017), p. 142.

60 Paul Harrison argues that Mahayana emerged from a north Indian forest-monk milieu. See *The Eastern Buddhist*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Spring 1995), pp. 48–69. See also Richard C. Folz, *Religions of the Silk Road: Overland Trade and Cultural Exchange from Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century* (Basingstoke, 1999), pp. 41–2. Gregory Schopen has a slightly different perspective and argues that Mahayana in early India was initially limited to select philosophers and did not take hold in any popular way until much later, the fifth century or so. He also argues that Mahayana ultimately failed in India, so Mahayanists had to find lay patronage elsewhere: Central Asia/China/South-east Asia. See Gregory Schopen, *Figments and Fragments of Mahayana Buddhism in India: More Collected Papers* (Honolulu, 2005). See also Daniel Boucher, *Bodhisattvas of the Forest and the Formation of the Mahayana: A Study and Translation of the* Rāṣṭrapālaparipṛcchā-sutra (Honolulu, 2008), and Jan Nattier, *A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path According to* The Inquiry of Ugra (Ugraparipṛcchā) (Honolulu, 2003).

61 This emphasizes the bodhisattva ideal as a new aim within Buddhism. Of course, the bodhisattva (or bodhisatta in Pali) already was there as the name of the Buddha in his previous 555 lives before he became enlightened; what changed now was that all serious Buddhists would take a vow to be a bodhisattva and to save all beings, like a Buddha, not just focus on their own salvation.

Bodhisattvas – specifically Buddhist divine figures who were still inside samsara and therefore could be prayed to and looked to for worldly help – became now the recipient of most Buddhist prayers. Up to this time, and still in Theravada (as still best explained in Richard Gombrich's *Buddhist Precept and Practice*), the Buddha is in nirvana and cannot be reached by prayers. All prayers directed towards him are good for the person praying, as training the mind and remembering good qualities, but there is no point in asking the Buddha for worldly benefits. If you want those, you will have to go to some (probably Hindu) god or spirit existing very much within this world. And you will have to bribe and bargain with them as with human others.

What changes with Mahayana is the introduction of specifically Buddhist objects of worldly worship. Avalokiteshvara (the lord who looks down [in compassion], also known as Karunamaya ['made of compassion'], and his female equivalent, Tara ('she who saves'). These meld into one female figure, in China, Kwanyin (Kannon in Japan).

This aspect of the bodhisattva is so central in Mahayana Buddhism that it may well have been there from the start, and it is very tempting to believe that this was a time of great crisis in north India when Buddhists were very much in need of saviour figures.

62 *The Lotus of the Wonderful Law, Or the Lotus Gospel*, trans. W. E. Soothill (Oxford, 1922), pp. 107, 114; Frankopan, *The Silk Roads*, p. 529.

63 While the explosion of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas is certainly central to the Mahayana, the idea of seven Buddhas and even Maitreya is found in the earlier Nikaya traditions. It should also be noted that there is little evidence that anyone in India cared much about the *Lotus Sutra* until the Gupta period.

64 Robert E. Buswell Jr and Donald S. Lopez Jr (eds), *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (Princeton, 2014), pp. 69, 1,033–4; Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 84–7.

65 Benjamin Brose, *Xuanzang: China's Legendary Pilgrim and Translator* (Boulder, Colo., 2021), pp. 18, 49–50.

66 Boardman, *The Greeks in Asia*, p. 185.

67 Ball, *Rome in the East*, p. 163; Rosa Maria Cimino, *Ancient Rome and India: Commercial and Cultural Contacts between the Roman World and India* (New Delhi, 1994), p. 23; Benjamin, *Empires of Ancient Eurasia*, p. 192.

68 DeCaroli, *Image Problems*, p. 99. According to Harry Falk, 'This world of the [Kushan] gods looks multifold, but the many gods underlie one supreme force of which the Kushan king is the representative "on earth". This implies that the king is not an "adherent", "follower" or "devotee" of one particular god among many, but a representative of the heavenly sphere, a sort of ambassador, with liabilities, but also with a right to receive the honours due to those above him. In short, he "has" no religion, he "is" religion, for others to have.' Falk, 'Kushan Religion and Politics', pp. 1–55.

69 John Boardman, *The Diffusion of Classical Art in Antiquity* (London, 1994), p. 124.

70 Kanishka explicitly states he is going 'Arian', which is Iranian. Neelis, *Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks*, pp. 135–40; Baumer, *The History of Central Asia*, Vol. 2: *The Age of the Silk Roads*, p. 32; Ghose, 'Nana: The "Original" Goddess on the Lion', p. 99.

71 Ghose, 'Nana: The "Original" Goddess on the Lion', p. 96; J. Harmatta, 'Religions in the Kushan Empire', in B. N. Puri and G. F. Etemadi (eds), *History of Civilisations of Central Asia*, Vol. 2: *The Development of Settled and Nomadic Civilisations 700 b.c. to a.d. 250* (Paris, 1994), pp. 313–30; Joe Cribb, 'Greekness after the End of the Bactrian and Indo-Greek Kingdoms', in Mairs (ed.), *The Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek World*, pp. 653–82; Doris Meth Srinivasan, 'Many Cultures, Many Gods', in Dorothy von Drachenfels and Christian Luczanits (eds), *Gandhara: The Buddhist Heritage of Pakistan: Legends, Monasteries, and Paradise* (Mainz am Rhein, 2008), pp. 116–21.

72 Ghose, 'Nana: The "Original" Goddess on the Lion', pp. 97–112. Also Baumer, *The History of Central Asia*, Vol. 2: *The Age of the Silk Roads*, p. 58.

73 B. N. Mukherjee, *Naāa on Lion: A Study in Kushana Numismatic Art* (Calcutta, 1969); Ghose, 'Nana: The "Original" Goddess on the Lion', pp. 97–112.

74 Kenneth Ch'en, *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey* (Princeton, 1964).

75 Many of the monks may have been from India too. 'Based on a study of the first three chapters of the *Gaosengzhuan*, a Chinese account compiled in 518 of biographies of eminent monks who established Buddhism in China, Shoshin Kuwayama has shown that during the fourth and fifth centuries a significant number of Indian monks traveled from India to China (S. Kuwayama, 'Pilgrimage Route Changes and the Decline of Gandh', in Pia Brancaccio and Kurt Behrendt (eds), *Gandhāran Buddhism: Archaeology, Art, and Texts* (Vancouver, 2006), pp. 107–34). According to the literary accounts many of these monks going to China resided at some point in eastern Afghanistan, an area where major Buddhist monasteries from this period are clearly documented. A good example is the monk Dharmaksema, originally from central India, who was responsible for the translation of the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* in Khotan in 421. The movement of Indian monks seems to have continued well into the following centuries. The Tang *Gaosengzhuan* includes for example, the biography of Dharmagupta, a monk who was originally from Lata, an area comprised between the lower course of the Narmada and Tapi rivers that is closely linked to the Ajanta range, who travelled to Taxila and beyond to China and translated the Saddharmapundarika sutra. Even if these Chinese accounts obviously focus only on travels of Indian monks to the north, they confirm that a major Buddhist conduit existed between western India, the greater Gandhara region, and the Tarim basin. This significant movement of monks may have provided vital lymph to cave sites located in the western Deccan that began to experience a phase of renaissance at the end of the fifth century.' Pia Brancaccio, 'The Silk Road and the Cotton Road: Buddhist Art and Practice between Central Asia and the Western Deccan', in Bruno Genito and Lucia Caterina (eds), *Archeologia delle Vie della Seta: Percorsi, immagini e cultura materiale*, 4 vols (Rome, 2017), Vol. 2, pp. 59–77.

76 E. Zürcher, 'Han Buddhism and the Western Region', in W. L. Idema and E. Zürcher (eds), *Thought and Law in Qin and Han China* (Leiden, 1990), pp. 158–82.

77 There are of course many elements in the complex and cosmopolitan art of Miran. The influence of Iran is seen in 'the Persian gesture' written about by Carol Bromberg. That of India can be seen the iconography of the Visvantara Jataka narratives going back to Bharut, . There is especially strong influence of Gandhara, and the way of depicting the Buddha at Miran has strong parallels in iconography to the sculptures of Butkara and Saidu Sharif as written about by Luca Olivieri. But stylistically the strongest parallels are with Coptic art, as was recognised as soon as they were uncovered by Aurel Stein. I would argue that the strongest parallels are specifically with Coptic textiles. It is these highly portable objects, along with small terracottas, figurines and statuettes and little bronzes, perhaps more than the expensive luxury items of the sort found at Bagram, that allow iconographies and ideas to travel. See Carol A. Bromberg, 'An Iranian Gesture at Miran', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* New Series, Vol. 5 (1991), pp. 45–58; Luca M. Olivieri, *Stoneyards and Artists in Gandhara: The Buddhist Stupa of Saidu Sharif I, Swat (50 ce)* (Venice, 2022), pp. 62, 181–9. Importantly, Olivieri shows that Kushan patronage was not the only or even the principal impetus for architectural, iconological and other important changes that are evident at the Saidu Sharif sacred complex.

78 Marianne Yaldiz, 'Evaluation of the Chronology of the Murals in Kizil, Kucha Oasis', in Eli Franko and Monika Zin (eds), *From Turfan to Ajanta: Festschrift for Dieter Schlingloff on the Occasion of his Eightieth Birthday* (Lumbini, 2010), pp. 1,029–44.

79 Yang Lu, 'Narrative and Historicity in the Buddhist Biographies of Early Medieval China: The Case of Kumārajīva', *Asia Major* 3rd Series, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2004), pp. 1–43. See also S. A. M. Adshead, *T'ang China: The Rise of the East in World History* (New York, 2004), p. 141.

80 Lu, 'Narrative and Historicity in the Buddhist Biographies of Early Medieval China', pp. 1–43.

81 Ibid., p. 7.
82 Ibid., p. 8.
83 Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History* (Oxford, 2012), p. 66.
84 Quoted in Ch'en, *Buddhism in China*, ch. III.
85 Lu, 'Narrative and Historicity in the Buddhist Biographies of Early Medieval China', p. 18.
86 Ibid., p. 22.
87 Ch'en, *Buddhism in China*, ch. III.
88 Ibid., p. 22.
89 Hansen, *The Silk Road*, p. 68.
90 E. Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China* (Leiden, 2007), p. 226.
91 Lu, 'Narrative and Historicity in the Buddhist Biographies of Early Medieval China', p. 31; Frances Wood, *The Silk Road: Two Thousand Years in the Heart of Asia* (Berkeley, 2002), p. 96.
92 Arthur F. Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History* (Stanford, 1959).
93 Lu, 'Narrative and Historicity in the Buddhist Biographies of Early Medieval China', pp. 40–1; Shenghai Li, 'Mirrors and Twinning: Patterns of Syllabic Repetition in Kukai and Dandin', in Yigal Bronner (ed.), *A Lasting Vision: Dandin's Mirror in the World of Asian Letters* (Oxford, 2023), p. 486.

4: The Sea of Jewels: Exploring the Great Library of Nalanda

1 Jeffrey Kotyk, 'Chinese State and Buddhist Historical Sources on Xuanzang', *T'oung Pao* Vol. 105 (2019), pp. 513–44.
2 Sramana Huili and Shi Yancong , *A Biography of the Tripiṭaka Master of the Great Ci'en Monastery*, trans. Li Rongxi (Berkeley, 1995), pp. 11–12; Benjamin Brose, *Xuanzang: China's Legendary Pilgrim and Translator* (Boulder, Colo., 2021).
3 Huili and Yancong, *A Biography of the Tripiṭaka Master of the Great Ci'en Monastery*, p. 11.
4 Ibid., pp. 4–5, 11–14.
5 Shaman Hwui Li, *The Life of Hiuen-Tsiang*, trans. Samuel Beal (London, 1911), pp. 16–18.
6 Huili and Yancong, *A Biography of the Tripiṭaka Master of the Great Ci'en Monastery*, p. 227; Brose, *Xuanzang*, p. 2.
7 Brose, *Xuanzang*, pp. 4, 76.
8 Ibid., p. 3.
9 It is worth emphasising the mind-boggling enormity of what Xuanzang initiated in beginning the translation all the Buddhist and other Sanskrit and Pali/Prakrit texts into Chinese. The sustained and collective effort required to accomplish this transfer of knowledge was surely unprecedented anywhere in the world at that time.
10 Huili and Yancong, *A Biography of the Tripiṭaka Master of the Great Ci'en Monastery*, p. 227.
11 Mario Poceski, 'Buddhism in Chinese History', in Mario Poceski (ed.), *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to East and Inner Asian Buddhism* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 40–63; E. Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China* (Leiden, 2007), p. 22; Angela Falco Howard, 'From Han to the Southern Song', in Angela Falco Howard, Wu Hung , Li Song and Yang Hong (eds), *Chinese Sculpture* (New York, 2006), pp. 201–356 at pp. 201, 203.
12 Tansen Sen (ed.), *Buddhism across Asia: Networks of Material, Intellectual and Cultural Exchange* (Singapore, 2014), p. xiv.
13 Arthur F. Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History* (Stanford, 1959), p. 21.
14 James C. Y. Watt, 'Art and History in China from the Third through the Eighth Century', in James C. Y. Watt (ed.), *China: Dawn of a Golden Age, 200–750 ce* (New York, 2004), pp. 2–46 at p. 5.
15 Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, pp. 30–5; Tansen Sen, 'The Spread of Buddhism to China: A Re-examination of the Buddhist Interactions between Ancient India and China', *China Report* Vol. 48, No. 1–2 (2012), pp. 11–27.
16 Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, p. 28.
17 Lukas Nickel (ed.), *Return of the Buddha: The Qingzhou Discoveries* (London, 2002), pp. 23–5.
18 Howard, 'From Han to the Southern Song', p. 201; Tansen Sen, 'Buddhism and Maritime Crossings', in Dorothy C. Wong and Gustav Heldt (eds), *China and Beyond in the Mediaeval Period: Cultural Crossings*

and Inter-Regional Connections (Amherst, 2014), p. 43; Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade: The Realignment of India–China Relations, 600–1400* (London, 2016), pp. 4–5; Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History*, p. 34; Kurt Behrendt, *How to Read Buddhist Art* (New York, 2019), p. 39.

19 For simplicity I have used Huns for the more specific Xiongnu.

20 Annette L. Juliano and Judith A. Lerner, *Monks and Merchants: Silk Road Treasures from Northwest China* (New York, 2002), pp. 15, 47; Arthur F. Wright, *The Sui Dynasty: The Unification of China, a.d. 581–617* (New York, 1978).

21 Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History*, pp. 30–5; Angela F. Howard, 'Buddhist Art in China', in Watt (ed.), *China*, pp. 89–99 at p. 89; Mario Poceski, 'Buddhism in Chinese History', p. 43; Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, p. 45.

22 Sen, 'The Spread of Buddhism to China', pp. 11–27.

23 Edward H. Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study in T'ang Exotics* (Berkeley, 1967), pp. 275–6.

24 Though the fact that we find pagoda temples in Kathmandu and in Bali suggests that they could possibly have come from first-millennium India originally.

25 Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History*, p. 41; Tansen Sen, *India, China and the World: A Connected History* (London, 2017), p. 40; Peter N. Gregory and Patricia Buckley Ebry, 'The Religious and Historical Landscape', in Patricia Buckley Ebry and Peter N. Gregory (eds), *Religion and Society in T'ang and Sung China* (Honolulu, 1993), p. 22; Victor Mair, *Tun-huang Popular Narratives* (Cambridge, 1993); Victor Mair, *T'ang Transformative Texts* (Cambridge, 1989); Victor Mair, *Painting and Performance: Picture Recitation and its Indian Genesis* (Honolulu, 1989).

26 Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade*, p. 7; Sen, 'The Spread of Buddhism to China', p. 23; Marilyn Rhie, *Early Buddhist Art of China and Central Asia* (Leiden, 2002), Vol. 2, p. 247.

27 S. A. M. Adshead, *T'ang China: The Rise of the East in World History* (New York, 2004), p. 37.

28 Warwick Ball, 'Gandhāra Perceptions: The Orbit of Gandhāran Studies', in Wannaporn Rienjang and Peter Stewart (eds), *The Global Connections of Gandhāran Art* (Oxford, 2020), pp. 1–25; Warwick Ball, *Monuments of Afghanistan: History, Archaeology and Architecture* (London, 2008), p. 85; Howard, 'Buddhist Art in China', p. 16.

29 Sen (ed.), *Buddhism across Asia*, p. xiv.

30 Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History*, p. 51; Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade*, p. 68.

31 Both Bodhidharma and the Shaolin monks have been highly romanticised. Some scholarly ballast on this subject can be found in the works of John McRae, *Seeing Through Zen: Encounter, Transformation and Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism* (Berkeley, 2004), and Meir Shahar, *The Shaolin Monastery: History, Religion, and the Chinese Martial Arts* (Honolulu, 2008).

32 John Macrae, 'The Hagiography of Bodhidharma: Reconstructing the Point of Origin of Chinese Chan Buddhism', in John Kieschnick and Meir Shahar (eds), *India in the Chinese Imagination: Myth, Religion and Thought* (Philadelphia, 2014), pp. 125–38; T. Griffith Foulk, 'The Spread of Chan (Zen) Buddhism', in Ann Heirman and Stephan Peter Bumbacher (eds), *The Spread of Buddhism* (Leiden, 2012), pp. 439–45.

33 Arthur F. Wright and Denis Twitchett (eds), *Perspectives on the T'ang* (New Haven and London, 1973), p. 2.

34 Wright, *The Sui Dynasty*, pp. 54–63, 139–56; Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History*, p. 65.

35 Chen Jinhua , *Monks and Monarchs, Kinship and Kingship: Tanqian in Sui Buddhism and Politics* (Kyoto, 2002), pp. 229–30; Ch'en, *Buddhism in China*, pp. 196–8.

36 Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade*, p. 68; Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History*, p. 67; Kenneth Ch'en, *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey* (Princeton, 1964), p. 199.

37 Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History*, p. 67.

38 Ch'en, *Buddhism in China*, p. 200.

39 John Kieschnick, *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture* (Princeton, 2003), pp. 40–1; Stanley Weinstein, *Buddhism Under the Tang* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 4–5; Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade*, pp. 68–9.

40 Denis Twitchett and John K. Fairbank (eds), *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 3: *Sui and T'ang China, 589–906, Part 1* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 54–5.

41 Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade*, pp. 69, 80–1.

42 Vikramashila, it should be noted, was founded later than the others, in the eighth century, long after

Xuanzang's visit.

43 Huili and Yancong, *A Biography of the Tripiṭaka Master of the Great Ci'en Monastery*, p. 24; Brose, *Xuanzang*, p. 2.

44 Huili and Yancong, *A Biography of the Tripiṭaka Master of the Great Ci'en Monastery*, pp. 26–8.

45 Ibid., p. 28.

46 Ibid., p. 29.

47 Ibid., p. 41.

48 Ibid., p. 50.

49 Xuanzang, *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions*, trans. Li Rongxi (Berkeley, 1996), p. 62.

50 André Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, Vol. 1: *Early Medieval India and the Expansion of Islam, 7th–11th Centuries* (Leiden, 2002), p. 227. There is some evidence that Mihirakula may not have been as vehemently anti-Buddhist as Xuanzang believed: a Chinese source called *The Luoyang qielan ji*, contemporary to the Hepthalites, shows the Buddhism flourishing at the period. There are also copperplates surviving showing that at least some of Mihirakula's line had patronised Buddhist monasteries.

51 In the south, the Satavahanas and Ikshvakus were still providing generous patronage to Buddhist institutions and it was probably around the time of Xuanzang's visit that many of the later caves at Ajanta were being excavated and their murals painted.

52 In their final and current form, the Puranas are late: the earliest Puranas date from around 600 ce, but they bring together much older oral traditions.

53 Martin Lehnert, 'Tantric Threads between India and China', in Heirman and Bumbacher (eds), *The Spread of Buddhism*, p. 251; Anirudh Kanisetti, *Lords of the Deccan: Southern India from the Chalukyas to the Cholas* (New Delhi, 2022), pp. 62–3.

54 Lars Fogelin, *An Archaeological History of Indian Buddhism* (Oxford, 2015), p. 180.

55 See Johannes Bronkhorst, *Buddhism in the Shadow of Brahmanism* (Leiden, 2011). There are some very interesting insights into possible reasons for the decline of Buddhism in Vincent Eltschinger, 'Apocalypticism, Heresy and Philosophy' In Piotr Balcerowicz (ed.), *World View and Theory in Indian Philosophy*. New Delhi: Manohar. pp. 29–85 (2012).

56 The question of the decline of Buddhism in India remains a contentious question. There are those, especially in Hindutva circles, who maintain that Hinduism and Buddhism, both dharmic religions, are almost the same faith, that the Buddha was an incarnation of Vishnu, and that the distinction between them has been exaggerated. There are others, usually Buddhist, who regard Buddhism as having been driven out of India by a Hindu revival; and they point to prominent Buddhist shrines such as Badrinath that were taken over by Hindus. Most scholars, however, believe that it was the decline of Buddhism as a popular faith which gave Hinduism its opportunity, and that cases of violent suppression of Buddhism are rare, even if there are persistent stories about the mass impaling of Jains in the south, something that is graphically depicted in several southern temples, and where in some cases the impaling stakes remain and are still venerated. My own view is that there was almost always competition between the two faiths, and that in the end, over most of India, Hinduism won – and was beginning to win very clearly in north India at the period of Xuanzang. So while there are Hindu kings such as Harsha who do patronise both Hindu and Buddhist institutions, Xuanzang is entering an India where Buddhism is clearly beginning to be a minority religion, which was probably not the case two or three hundred years before when earlier pilgrims like Faxian were visiting the Buddhist holy places.

57 Huili and Yancong, *A Biography of the Tripiṭaka Master of the Great Ci'en Monastery*, p. 65.

58 Ibid., pp. 75–8.

59 Ibid., p. 89.

60 Xuanzang, *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions*, p. 250.

61 Huili and Yancong, *A Biography of the Tripiṭaka Master of the Great Ci'en Monastery*, p. 91.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid., p. 94.

64 Wang Xiang, 'From Nālandā to Chang'an: A Survey of Buddhist Libraries in Medieval China (618–907)', in Sen (ed.), *Buddhism Across Asia*, pp. 207–32 at p. 210.

65 Fogelin, *An Archaeological History of Indian Buddhism*, pp. 204–5.

66 A. L. Basham, *The Wonder That was India* (New Delhi, 1967), p. 165.

67 Xuanzang, *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions*, p. 250.
68 Huili and Yancong, *A Biography of the Tripiṭaka Master of the Great Ci'en Monastery*, pp. 94–5.
69 Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade*, pp. 18–19, 251; Kanisetti, *Lords of the Deccan*, pp. 50–1.
70 Hans T. Bakker, *The World of the Skandapurana: Northern India in the Sixth and Seventh Centuries* (Leiden, 2014), pp. 18, 124–5; Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade*, p. 33.
71 Brose, *Xuanzang*, p. 45.
72 Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade*, p. 117; Upinder Singh, 'Gifts from Other Lands: Southeast Asian Royal Religious Endowments in India', in Upinder Singh and Parul Pandya Dhar (eds), *Asian Encounters: Exploring Connected Histories* (New Delhi, 2014), pp. 45–61 at p. 46.
73 Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade*, p. 117.
74 Andrea Acri (ed.), *Esoteric Buddhism in Mediaeval Maritime Asia: Networks of Masters, Texts, Icons* (Singapore, 2016), Introduction, pp. 11, 17.
75 Xiang, 'From Nalanda to Chang'an', p. 210. Taranatha (1575–1634) was a lama of the Jonang school of Tibetan Buddhism.
76 Brose, *Xuanzang*, pp. 46–7.
77 Huili and Yancong, *A Biography of the Tripiṭaka Master of the Great Ci'en Monastery*, p. 139.
78 Ibid., pp. 138–9; Brose, *Xuanzang*, p. 62.
79 Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade*, pp. 18–22, 216; Bakker, *The World of the Skandapurana*, p. 122.
80 Brose, *Xuanzang*, pp. 55–61.
81 Ibid., p. 63.
82 Ibid., pp. 63–5.
83 Huili and Yancong, *A Biography of the Tripiṭaka Master of the Great Ci'en Monastery*, pp. 168–9; Stewart Gordon, *When Asia was the World* (Bury St Edmunds, 2008), p. 17.
84 Brose, *Xuanzang*, pp. 70–1.
85 Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade*, p. 33.
86 Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang*, p. 6.
87 Ibid., p. 12.
88 Ibid., p. 24; Stanley Weinstein, 'Imperial Patronage in T'ang Buddhism', in Wright and Twitchett (eds), *Perspectives on the T'ang*, p. 294.
89 Sen, *India, China and the World*, pp. 59–60; Gordon, *When Asia was the World*, p. 19.
90 Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang*, pp. 12–24; Brose, *Xuanzang*, p. 81.
91 Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade*, p. 38.

5: The Fifth Concubine

1 For clarity I have continued to call Wu Empress even after she took the title of Emperor.
2 N. Harry Rothschild, *Emperor Wu Zhao and her Pantheon of Devis, Divinities and Dynastic Mothers* (New York, 2015), pp. 38–9; Patricia Karetsky, 'Wu Zetian and Buddhist Art of the Tang Dynasty', *T'ang Studies* No. 20–21 (2002–3), pp. 113–50 at p. 125; Denis Twitchett and John K. Fairbank (eds), *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 3: *Sui and T'ang China, 589–906, Part 1* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 244–5.
3 R. W. L. Guisso, *Wu Tse-t'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China* (Bellingham, 1978), pp. 11–15, 27; N. Harry Rothschild, *Wu Zhao: China's Only Woman Emperor* (New York, 2008), pp. 1–21; Karetsky, 'Wu Zetian and Buddhist Art of the Tang Dynasty', p. 125; T. H. Barrett, *The Woman Who Discovered Printing* (New Haven, 2008), pp. 73–5; S. A. M. Adshead, *T'ang China: The Rise of the East in World History* (New York, 2004), pp. 40–1.
4 C. P. Fitzgerald, *The Empress Wu* (Melbourne, 1955), p. 1; Rothschild, *Wu Zhao*, p. 23.
5 Rothschild, *Wu Zhao*, pp. 2, 25.
6 Fitzgerald, *The Empress Wu*, p. 13; Rothschild, *Wu Zhao*, p. 27.
7 David Lattimore, 'Allusion and T'ang Poetry', in Arthur F. Wright and Denis Twitchett (eds), *Perspectives on the T'ang* (New Haven and London, 1973), p. 436.
8 Barrett, *The Woman Who Discovered Printing*, pp. 73–5.
9 Stanley Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 6.
10 Benjamin Brose, *Xuanzang: China's Legendary Pilgrim and Translator* (Boulder, Colo., 2021), p. 26.
11 Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade: The Realignment of India–China Relations, 600–1400*

(London, 2016), pp. 40–2; Brose, *Xuanzang*, p. 79; Edward H. Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study in T'ang Exotics* (Berkeley, 1967), p. 50.

12 Twitchett and Fairbank (eds), *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 3: *Sui and T'ang China, 589–906, Part 1,* p. 239; Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang*, pp. 25–7.

13 Guisso, *Wu Tse-t'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China*, pp. 16–17.

14 Rothschild, *Wu Zhao*, p. 29.

15 Fitzgerald, *The Empress Wu*, p. 19; Rothschild, *Wu Zhao*, pp. 28–30.

16 Rebecca Doran, *Transgressive Typologies: Constructions of Gender and Power in Early Tang China* (Cambridge, Mass., 2016), pp. 5–6, 65–7; Rothschild, *Wu Zhao*, pp. xi–xiv; Twitchett and Fairbank (eds), *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 3: *Sui and T'ang China, 589–906, Part 1*, p. 245; Barrett, *The Woman Who Discovered Printing*, p. 6.

17 Brose, *Xuanzang*, pp. 84–5.

18 Fitzgerald, *The Empress Wu*, p. 22; Rothschild, *Wu Zhao*, pp. 34–6.

19 Rothschild, *Wu Zhao*, pp. 35–8.

20 Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade*, p. 93.

21 Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang*, p. 38.

22 Fitzgerald, *The Empress Wu*, p. 31.

23 Ibid., p. 32.

24 Guisso, *Wu Tse-t'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China*, pp. 19, 28.

25 Ibid., pp. 17–19, 156; Twitchett and Fairbank (eds), *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 3: *Sui and T'ang China, 589–906, Part 1*, pp. 247–9; Barrett, *The Woman Who Discovered Printing*, p. 83; Mark Edward Lewis, *China's Cosmopolitan Empire: The Tang Dynasty* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009), p. 37.

26 Guisso, *Wu Tse-t'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China*, p. 28.

27 Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang*, p. 38.

28 Rothschild, *Wu Zhao*, p. 50.

29 Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, trans. in Guisso, *Wu Tse-t'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China*, p. 20; Chen Jinhua , *Monks and Monarchs, Kinship and Kingship: Tanqian in Sui Buddhism and Politics* (Kyoto, 2002), p. 126.

30 Karetsky, 'Wu Zetian and Buddhist Art of the Tang Dynasty', p. 115.

31 Kenneth Ch'en, *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey* (Princeton, 1964), p. 221; Guisso, *Wu Tse-t'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China*, p. 150.

32 Mario Poceski, 'Buddhism in Chinese History', in Mario Poceski (ed.), *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to East and Inner Asian Buddhism* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 40–63 at pp. 49–50.

33 Rothschild, *Emperor Wu Zhao and her Pantheon of Devis, Divinities and Dynastic Mothers*, pp. 207–7; Barrett, *The Woman Who Discovered Printing*, p. 78.

34 Swati Chemburkar, 'Borobudur's Pāla Forebear? A Field Note from Kesariya, Bihar, India', in Andrea Acri (ed.), *Esoteric Buddhism in Mediaeval Maritime Asia: Networks of Masters, Texts, Icons* (Singapore, 2016), p. 204. See also *Ennin's Diary: The Record of a Pilgrimage to China in Search of the Law*, trans. E. O. Reischauer (New York, 1955), p. 253.

35 Karetsky, 'Wu Zetian and Buddhist Art of the Tang Dynasty', pp. 113–21; Weinstein, *Buddhism Under the T'ang*, p. 39.

36 Patricia Karetsky has suggested the texts about Vairocana may instead have been brought from India by Yijing; see her 'Wu Zetian and Buddhist Art of the Tang Dynasty', p. 120.

37 For e.g. Gong Dazhong , *Longmen shiku yishu* [*The Art in the Longmen Grottoes*] (Shanghai, 1981), pp. 141–2; Angela F. Howard, 'Buddhist Art in China', in James C. Y. Watt (ed.), *China: Dawn of a Golden Age, 200–750 ce* (New York, 2004), p. 98; Angela Falco Howard, 'From Han to the Southern Song', in Angela Falco Howard, Wu Hung , Li Song and Yang Hong (eds), *Chinese Sculpture* (New York, 2006), pp. 201–356 at pp. 201, 298–9; Rothschild, *Emperor Wu Zhao and her Pantheon of Devis, Divinities and Dynastic Mothers*, pp. 224–5; Karetsky, 'Wu Zetian and Buddhist Art of the Tang Dynasty', pp. 117, 120.

38 Brose, *Xuanzang: China's Legendary Pilgrim and Translator*, p. 100.

39 Stanley Weinstein, 'Imperial Patronage in T'ang Buddhism', in Wright and Twitchett (eds), *Perspectives on the T'ang*, p. 296.

40 Guisso, *Wu Tse-t'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China*, p. 35.

41 Brose, *Xuanzang*, p. 102. It is difficult to communicate the scale of Xuanzang's achievements.

Leaving aside his extraoradinary travels, the translation of Buddhist and Indian learning into Chinese over which he presided was arguably one of the first such wholesale transfers of knowledge from one thought-world to another in world history.

42 Fitzgerald, *The Empress Wu*, p. 38; Rothschild, *Emperor Wu Zhao and her Pantheon of Devis, Divinities and Dynastic Mothers*, p. 38.

43 Howard J. Wechsler, *Offerings of Jade and Silk: Ritual and Symbol in the Legitimation of the T'ang Dynasty* (New Haven and London, 1985), p. 233; Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang*, p. 39; Doran, *Transgressive Typologies*, p. 68.

44 Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang*, p. 39.

45 Rothschild, *Wu Zhao*, p. 81.

46 Guisso, *Wu Tse-t'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China*, p. 54; Barrett, *The Woman Who Discovered Printing*, pp. 80–1; Fitzgerald, *The Empress Wu*, p. 90; Rothschild, *Wu Zhao*, pp. 82–5.

47 Twitchett and Fairbank (eds), *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 3: *Sui and T'ang China, 589–906, Part 1*, p. 295; Guisso, *Wu Tse-t'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China*, pp. 4, 58.

48 Confucius, *Analects*, XVII: 25, quoted by Guisso, *Wu Tse-t'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China*, p. 4; Rothschild, *Wu Zhao*, p. 98.

49 Antonino Forte, *Political Propaganda and Ideology in China at the End of the Seventh Century: Inquiry into the Nature, Authors and Function of the Tunhuang Document S. 6502 Followed by an Annotated Translation* (Naples, 1976).

50 Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang*, p. 41; Doran, *Transgressive Typologies*, p. 115; Fitzgerald, *The Empress Wu*, p. 128; Edward H. Schafer, *Pacing the Void: T'ang Approaches to the Stars* (Berkeley, 2005), pp. 165–6; Rothschild, *Wu Zhao*, pp. 70, 158; Guisso, *Wu Tse-t'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China*, p. 68.

51 Jinhua, *Monks and Monarchs*, p. 127; Guisso, *Wu Tse-t'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China*, pp. 66–9.

52 Quoted in Jowen R. Tung, *Fables for the Patriarchs: Gender Politics in Tang Discourse* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 61–2; Forte, *Political Propaganda and Ideology in China at the End of the Seventh Century*, p. 263. See also Twitchett and Fairbank (eds), *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 3: *Sui and T'ang China, 589–906, Part 1*, p. 305; Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade*, p. 95; Guisso, *Wu Tse-t'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China*, p. 37; Rothschild, *Emperor Wu Zhao and her Pantheon of Devis, Divinities and Dynastic Mothers*, pp. 211–13.

53 Kieschnick, *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture*, p. 101. For Huaiyi as Wu's lover see Guisso, *Wu Tse-t'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China*, pp. 62–3; Doran, *Transgressive Typologies*, pp. 208–10; Rothschild, *Wu Zhao*, pp. 98–9, and Barrett, *The Woman Who Discovered Printing*, p. 82.

54 Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand*, p. 50.

55 Karetsky, 'Wu Zetian and Buddhist Art of the Tang Dynasty', p. 118.

56 Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang*, p. 43; Rothschild, *Emperor Wu Zhao and her Pantheon of Devis, Divinities and Dynastic Mothers*, p. 191.

57 Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang*, pp. 42–3.

58 Fitzgerald, *The Empress Wu*, pp. 120–3.

59 Wechsler, *Offerings of Jade and Silk*, pp. 195, 200, 210. For the idea that, like Borobudur, the Mingtang may have been based on a *yantra* see Hiram Woodward, 'Bianhong, Mastermind of Borobudur?', *Pacific World: Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies* 3rd Series, No. 11 (Fall 2009), pp. 25–62.

60 Guisso, *Wu Tse-t'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China*, p. 37.

61 Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade*, pp. 94–5.

62 Antonino Forte, *Mingtang and Buddhist Utopias in the History of the Astronomical Clock: The Tower, Statue and Armillary Sphere Constructed by the Empress Wu* (Rome, 1988), pp. xi, 22–3, 36, 53, 82–3, 90–3, 109–10, 195, 262, 253–5.

63 Ibid.; Schafer, *Pacing the Void*, pp. 17–20. See also Rothschild, *Wu Zhao*, pp. 112–14.

64 Schafer, *Pacing the Void*, pp. 17–20. While scholars agree on little about the Mingtang complex, the Axis of the Sky has proven especially divisive. Some see it as a monument to international Buddhist pacifism and cooperation, 'reminiscent of the pillars of Ashoka'. Others, in stark contrast, view it as a victory monument like Trajan's Column, celebrating the founding of the Emperor Wu's new Zhou

dynasty. One scholar has even convinced himself that it is instead 'a phallic symbol, an extension of the female emperor Wu Zetian … portraying erection, ejaculation and castration'. N. Harry Rothschild, 'Severing Grandma's Phallus: A Gendered Re-examination of the Raising and Razing of Female Emperor Wu Zhao's Axis of the Sky', *Left History* Vol. 21, No. 2 (Fall/Winter 2017/18), pp. 51–72.

65 Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade*, p. 98.

66 Rothschild, *Emperor Wu Zhao and her Pantheon of Devis, Divinities and Dynastic Mothers*, pp. 219–21.

67 Rothschild, 'Severing Grandma's Phallus', p. 60.

68 Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade*, pp. 96–7, 251; Chemburkar, 'Borobudur's Pāla Forebear?', p. 203 n. 46.

69 Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade*, p. 97; Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang*, p. 44; Robert E. Buswell Jr and Donald S. Lopez Jr (eds), *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (Princeton, 2014), p. 153.

70 Kevin van Bladel, 'Eighth-Century Indian Astronomy in the Two Cities of Peace', in Behnam Sadeghi et al. (eds), *Islamic Cultures, Islamic Contexts: Essays in Honor of Professor Patricia Crone* (Leiden, 2014), pp. 257–94; Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade*, pp. 97–8; Tansen Sen, *India, China and the World: A Connected History* (London, 2017), pp. 84–7; Schafer, *Pacing the Void*, pp. 10–11; Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand*, p. 275.

71 Ann Heirman, 'Abridged Teaching (*Lüe Jiao*): Monastic Rules between India and China', in Tansen Sen (ed.), *Buddhism across Asia: Networks of Material, Intellectual and Cultural Exchange* (Singapore, 2014), p. 194; Karetsky, 'Wu Zetian and Buddhist Art of the Tang Dynasty', p. 128.

72 Tansen Sen, 'Yijing and the Buddhist Cosmopolis of the Seventh Century', in Haun Saussy (ed.), *Texts and Transformations: Essays in Honor of the 75th Birthday of Victor H. Mair* (Amherst, 2018), pp. 345–68 at p. 349.

73 Weinstein, 'Imperial Patronage in T'ang Buddhism', p. 299; Barrett, *The Woman Who Discovered Printing*, p. 88; Karetsky, 'Wu Zetian and Buddhist Art of the Tang Dynasty', p. 116.

74 Karetsky, 'Wu Zetian and Buddhist Art of the Tang Dynasty', p. 116.

75 Wang Xiang, 'From Nālandā to Chang'an: A Survey of Buddhist Libraries in Medieval China (618–907)', in Sen (ed.), *Buddhism across Asia*, pp. 207–32.

76 Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand*, p. 274.

77 Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang*, p. 45; Guisso, *Wu Tse-t'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China*, p. 48.

78 Guisso, *Wu Tse-t'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China*, p. 48; Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang*, p. 45; Arthur F. Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History* (Stanford, 1959), p. 79.

79 Rothschild, *Wu Zhao*, p. 142. See also Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang*, pp. 46–7; Weinstein, 'Imperial Patronage in T'ang Buddhism', pp. 302–3.

80 John Kieschnick and Meir Shahar (eds), *India in the Chinese Imagination: Myth, Religion and Thought* (Philadelphia, 2014), Introduction, pp. 1–2; Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand*, pp. 50–2. Some things, for example alchemy, paper and gunpowder, went in reverse from China to India.

81 Rothschild, *Wu Zhao*, p. 151; Fitzgerald, *The Empress Wu*, pp. 133–5; Doran, *Transgressive Typologies*, p. 212.

82 Tung, *Fables for the Patriarchs*, p. 66; Fitzgerald, *The Empress Wu*, pp. 168–9; Guisso, *Wu Tse-t'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China*, p. 147; Doran, *Transgressive Typologies*, p. 161.

83 James C. Y. Watt, 'Art and History in China from the 3rd through the 8th Century', in Watt (ed.), *China*, pp. 39, 297; Rothschild, *Wu Zhao*, pp. 186–7.

84 Rothschild, *Wu Zhao*, pp. 156, 192, 196; Kieschnick, *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture*, p. 235; Watt, 'Art and History in China from the 3rd through the 8th Century', p. 99.

85 Rothschild, *Wu Zhao*, p. 185.

86 Tung, *Fables for the Patriarchs*, p. 66; Twitchett and Fairbank (eds), *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 3: *Sui and T'ang China, 589–906, Part 1*, p. 321; Fitzgerald, *The Empress Wu*, pp. 190–1.

87 Fitzgerald, *The Empress Wu*, pp. 195–7; Guisso, *Wu Tse-t'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China*, p. 154.

88 Tung, *Fables for the Patriarchs*, p. 68; Barrett, *The Woman Who Discovered Printing*, pp. 103, 118.

89 Tung, *Fables for the Patriarchs*, p. 67; Rothschild, *Wu Zhao*, p. 2.

6: The Diaspora of the Gods

1 Vidya Dehejia, *The Body Adorned: Dissolving Boundaries between Sacred and Profane in India's Art* (New York, 2019), p. 52; Padma Kaimal, 'The Problem of Portraiture in South India, circa 870–970 ad', *Artibus Asiae* Vol. 59, No. 1–2 (1999), pp. 59–133; David Shulman, *Tamil: A Biography* (Cambridge, 2016), p. 142.

2 Manu V. Devadevan, 'From the Cult of Chivalry to the Cult of Personality: The Seventh-Century Transformation in Pallava Statecraft', *Studies in History* Vol. 33, No. 2 (2007), pp. 127–59.

3 Marilyn Hirsh, 'Mahendravarman I Pallava: Artist and Patron of Māmallapuram', *Artibus Asiae* Vol. 48, No. 1 (1987), pp. 109–30; Vidya Dehejia, *The Thief Who Stole my Heart* (New York, 2020), p. 242; Shulman, *Tamil*, pp. 142–4.

4 Anirudh Kanisetti, *Lords of the Deccan: Southern India from the Chalukyas to the Cholas* (New Delhi, 2022), pp. 79–80.

5 Shulman, *Tamil*, p. 144; Himanshu Prabha Ray, *Coastal Shrines and Transnational Maritime Networks across India and Southeast Asia* (London, 2020), p. 158.

6 I am referring here to the very early Natesan Shiva at Mayalagan, still lacking the dwarf demon under him that appears in later Natarajas. With thanks to S. Vijay Kumar who brought me to this little-visited site.

7 The guardians of Mandagapattu are perhaps also anthropomorphised representations of Śiva's trident and axe (the prongs of the trident emerge from the base behind the guardian on the left, and the blade of the axe protrudes from the front of the headdress of the guardian on the right).

8 Vidya Dehejia, *Indian Art* (London, 1997), p. 185; Elizabeth Beck, *Pallava Rock Architecture and Sculpture* (Madras, 2006), pp. 46–7.

9 Although there are references to Hindu worship in Tamil Sangam poetry dating back to the fifth century bce, and in the floor plans of apsidal temples in some profusion around Nagarajunakonda in Andhra Pradesh, probably dating back to to c.150 bce, Mahendra's monuments are arguably the oldest surviving Hindu monuments in the far south of India. Before him Hindu monuments in the Tamil country were built in perishable materials, and have disappeared from sight. Before him there were also Buddhist and Jain monasteries in stone, as well as a profusion of earlier megaliths and stones raised commemorating the heroic dead.

10 We simply don't know much about earlier figures, but Mahendravarman is certainly the first Pallava king to make his devotions explicit in inscriptions.

11 Antal/Andal, trans. Vidya Dehejia, in Vidya Dehejia, *Antal and her Path of Love* (New York, 1990), p. 105. For more gorgeous translations of Antal/Andal see Archana Venkatesan (ed. and trans.), *The Secret Garden: Andal's* Tiruppavai *and* Nacciyar Tirumoli (New Delhi, 2016).

12 C. R. Srinavasan, *Kanchipuram through the Ages* (Delhi, 1979), pp. 28–9; Indira Viswanathan Peterson, *Poems to Siva: The Hymns of the Tamil Saints* (Delhi, 2007), pp. 8–9; Dehejia, *The Thief Who Stole my Heart*, p. 242; Ronald Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement* (New York, 2002), p. 192; Upinder Singh, *Ancient India: A Culture of Contradictions* (New Delhi, 2021).

13 Andrea Acri, 'Hinduism in Pre-Modern Southeast Asia: Tamil Perspectives', in Arun Mahizhnan and Nalini Gopal (eds), *Sojourners to Settlers: Tamils in Southeast Asia* (Singapore, 2019), Vol. 1, pp. 51–63 at p. 64. See also, in the same volume, John Miksic, 'Tamil Influence on Buddhism in Southeast Asia', p. 75.

14 There is an annual festival still celebrated at the Meenakshi Temple at Madurai, then the capital of the rival Pandya dynasty, which rather alarmingly commemorates the alleged impalement of no fewer than 8,000 Jains at the young saint's urging. The sentence of mass impalement was in revenge for the Jains' alleged attempt to kill Sambandar, who was guru to the Pandya king.

15 Nammalvar, *Hymns for the Drowning*, trans. A. K. Ramanujan (New Delhi, 2005), No. 5, 8.8.10, p. 41.

16 Though of course the gestures of dance and the gestures of sculpture only came to be called *mudra* (a term borrowed from the ritual gestures of works of the Mantramārga) many centuries later.

17 Himanshu Prabha Ray is a lone dissenter from the usual perception that Mamallapuram was the principal Pallava port, in her *Coastal Shrines and Transnational Maritime Networks across India and Southeast Asia*, ch. 5.

18 Kanakalatha Mukund, *Merchants of Tamulakam: Pioneers of International Trade* (New Delhi, 2012), p. 67; Dehejia, *Indian Art*, pp. 186–7.

19 Dandin, *What Ten Young Men Did*, trans. Isabelle Onians (New York, 2005); Robert DeCaroli, 'An Analysis of Daṇḍin's *Daśakumāracarita* and its Implications for Both the Vākāṭaka and Pallava Courts', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* Vol. 115, No. 4 (October–December 1995), pp. 671–8; Yigal Bronner, 'A Question of Priority: Revisiting the Bhāmaha–Daṇḍin Debate', *Journal of Indian Philosophy* Vol. 40, No. 1 (2012), pp. 67–118.

20 Dandin, *What Ten Young Men Did.*

21 Kanisetti, *Lords of the Deccan*, p. 133.

22 Dandin, *Avantisundari*, quoted by Michael D. Rabe, 'The Māmallapuram Praśasti: A Panegyric in Figures', *Artibus Asiae* Vol. 57, No. 3–4 (1997), pp. 189–241 at p. 198.

23 So believes Sheldon Pollock. See Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men* (Berkeley, 2003), p. 163. There were other towering stylists too, notably Kalidasa and Baṇa, and their influence was just as great even though they did not theorise about poetics. For the extraordinarily important influence of Kalidasa on Khmer royal inscriptions, see Goodall, Dominic, 'Kālidāsa's Kingship among the Khmers', Gonda Lecture 29, Amsterdam: Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen.

24 Yigal Bronner (ed.), *A Lasting Vision: Dandin's Mirror in the World of Asian Letters* (Oxford, 2023).

25 Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men*, p. 123.

26 Ibid., p. 163; Yigal Bronner, *Extreme Poetry: The South Asian Movement of Simultaneous Narration* (New York, 2010), p. 197. Yigal Bronner has also edited a wonderful new book of essays which traces Dandin's ideas of poetics across the breadth of the Indosphere: *A Lasting Vision*, pp. 1–6, 15–18, 23–4, 51–2, 308–16, 362, 412–23, 458–9, 466–80.

27 Walter Smith, 'The Viṣṇu Image in the Shore Temple at Māmallapuram', *Artibus Asiae* Vol. 56, No. 1–2 (1996), pp. 19–32 at p. 22.

28 Rabe, 'The Māmallapuram Praśasti', p. 200; Bronner, *Extreme Poetry*, p. 97; R. Nagaswamy, 'New Light on Mamallapuram', *Transactions of the Archaeological Society of South India* (1962), pp. 1–50; Michael Lockwood, Gift Siromoney and P. Dayanandan, *Mahabalipuram Studies* (Madras, 1974).

29 Dandin, *Avantisundari*, quoted by Rabe, 'The Māmallapuram Praśasti', p. 198.

30 Ibid., p. 199.

31 Padma Kaimal, 'Playful Ambiguity and Political Authority in the Large Relief at Māmallapuram', *Ars Orientalis* Vol. 24 (1994), pp. 1–27; Vidya Dehejia and Richard Davis, 'Addition, Erasure, and Adaptation: Interventions in the Rock-Cut Monuments of Māmallapuram', *Archives of Asian Art* Vol. 60 (2010), pp. 1–18; Dehejia, *Indian Art*, p. 192; Bronner, *Extreme Poetry*, pp. 92–102.

32 Devadevan, 'From the Cult of Chivalry to the Cult of Personality', p. 143; George Coedès, *The Indianised States of Southeast Asia* (Honolulu, 1964), pp. 20–1; Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya, *The Making of Early Medieval India* (Delhi, 1994).

33 R. Champakalakshmi, 'The Urban Configurations of Tondaimandalam: The Kanchipuram Region c. ad 600–1300', *Studies in the History of Art* Vol. 31 (1993), pp. 185–207; R. Champakalakshmi, *Trade, Ideology and Urbanisation: South India 300 bc to ad 1300* (Oxford, 1996).

34 James Howard-Johnston, 'The India Trade in Late Antiquity', in Eberhard Sauer (ed.), *Sasanian Persia: Between Rome and the Steppes of Eurasia* (Edinburgh, 2017), pp. 284–304, esp. pp. 287, 294–5; Steven E. Sidebotham, *Berenike and the Ancient Maritime Spice Route* (Berkeley, 2012), pp. 259–82; Timothy Power, *The Red Sea from Byzantium to the Caliphate, ad 500–1000* (Cairo, 2012), pp. 23–4, 37–9. Power equates the Blemmyes with the modern Beja people (p. 35). Procopius in the early sixth century observes that 'it was impossible for the Ethiopians to buy silk from the Indians, for the Persian merchants always locate themselves at the very harbours where the Indian ships first put in (since they inhabit the adjoining country), and are accustomed to buying the whole cargoes' (*The Persian War*, 1.20.12). But this same passage makes clear that Indian ships were still putting out to western Indian Ocean ports.

35 Constantin Pion, Bernard Gratuze, Patrick Périn and Thomas Calligaro, 'Bead and Garnet Trade between the Merovingian, Mediterranean, and Indian Worlds', in Bonnie Effros and Isabel Moreira (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the Merovingian World* (Oxford, 2020), pp. 819–59, shows how garnets from Rajmahal near Tonk in Rajasthan, and glass beads made in and around Arikamedu, both of which figured prominently in early Merovingian jewellery, and at Sutton Hoo, disappear from circulation between 530 and 600, exactly the time that the port of Berenike was abandoned. Throughout the fifth and sixth centuries, some Indian merchants were still clearly active in the western Indian Ocean sphere

and Indian goods were still circulating throughout western Eurasia: Indian glass beads appear, for example, in no fewer than forty-four early Merovingian cemeteries. Indian and Sri Lankan garnets were the stone of choice in early Merovingian cloisonné jewellery, but 'by the 600s Indian garnets ceased to be traded in the West … as the situation deteriorated at the end of the sixth century with the Persian Empire's control of the Red Sea'. Thereafter Indian garnets are replaced by inferior stones from Czechoslovakia and Portugal.

36 Kasper Grønlund Evers, *Worlds Apart Trading Together: The Organisation of Long-Distance Trade between Rome and India in Antiquity* (Oxford, 2017), p. 120. Of course, some ships continued to sail each way with the monsoon. Indian traders were a diverse lot with varying capacities and intentions. There was still a substantial Indian trading diaspora based in the Persian Gulf throughout the first millennium ce. There are lots of Indian cooking pots belonging to this diaspora which have turned up at various Persian Gulf sites: see Derek Kennet, *Sasanian and Islamic Pottery from Ras al-Khaimah: Classification, Chronology and Analysis of Trade in the Western Indian Ocean* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 94–6. For Quseir see Sidebotham, *Berenike and the Ancient Maritime Spice Route*, pp. 259–82, esp. p. 262.

The big difference was the increasingly stiff competition Indian traders faced from Persian and Arab shippers and traders from the Sasanian period onwards. There is a sixth-century Middle Persian inscription left by a group of Sasanian Zoroastrian traders on the outside wall of cell 90 at the Buddhist site of Kanheri, in north Mumbai. Arabo-Persian traders were increasingly encroaching on the South-east Asian market by the early Islamic period too, which up till then had been dominated by Indian traders. This may help explain why the Pallava king Narasimhavarman II sought an alliance with the Tang court against the Arabs in the early eighth century. For more on this complicated picture see Maja Kominko, 'Beyond Empire: Kosmas Indikopleustes, the Church of the East and the Indian Trade in the Sixth Century ad', in E. R. O'Connell (ed.), *Egypt and Empire: The Formation of Religious Identity after Rome* (Leuven, 2022), pp. 173–97; James Howard-Johnston, 'The India Trade in Late Antiquity', in Eberhard Sauer (ed.), *Sasanian Persia: Between Rome and the Steppes of Eurasia* (Edinburgh, 2017), pp. 284–304.

37 Howard-Johnston, 'The India Trade in Late Antiquity', pp. 287–8.

38 Himanshu Prabha Ray, 'Ethnographies of Sailing: From the Red Sea to the Bay of Bengal in Antiquity', in Matthew Adam Cobb (ed.), *The Indian Ocean Trade in Antiquity: Political, Cultural and Economic Impacts* (Oxford, 2019), p. 80; André Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, Vol. 1: *Early Medieval India and the Expansion of Islam, 7th–11th Centuries* (Leiden, 2002), pp. 336–7; Howard-Johnston, 'The India Trade in Late Antiquity', p. 284; Sidebotham, *Berenike and the Ancient Maritime Spice Route*, pp. 259–82, esp. pp. 277–9; Timothy Power, *The Red Sea from Byzantium to the Caliphate, ad 500–1000* (Cairo, 2012).

In the late fifth and early sixth century, from the reign of Justin onwards, we see for the first time a small number of Byzantine coins (around one hundred) reaching China. Their inland and northern distribution may indicate Roman caravans being forced to make the overland route via Armenia and Sogdia in order to break the Persian maritime embargo blocking access to silk via the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. See Qiang Li, 'Roman Coins Discovered in China and their Research', *Eirene: Studia Graeca et Latina* Vol. 51 (2015), pp. 279–99, esp. p. 284, online at https://www.academia.edu/19512723/ROMAN_COINS_DISCOVERED_IN_CHINA_AND_THEIR_RESEARCH. Qiang Li's fig. 1 plots the distribution of Byzantine coins in China by time of minting and shows a sudden spike of Byzantine coins turning up in the century between 450 and 550, after which the number falls again. See also Kominko, 'Beyond Empire'.

39 Meera Abraham, *Two Medieval Merchant Guilds of South India* (Old Delhi, 1988); Mukund, *Merchants of Tamulakam: Pioneers of International Trade*; Paul Michel Munoz, *Early Kingdoms: Indonesian Archipelago and the Malay Peninsula* (Singapore, 2006), pp. 122–3. See E. Edwards McKinnon, 'Merchant Guilds: Merchant Links with Aceh and Northern Sumatra', in Mahizhnan and Gopal (eds), *Sojourners to Settlers*, pp. 27, 136–44.

Gold prospecting was probably the major motivator in Indian involvement in South-east Asia, but it certainly was not the only reason for the marked eastward turn between 400 and 550 ce. There is evidence for Indian gold working in South-east Asia already from the late centuries bce, so there's nothing particularly new about Indians seeking gold in South-east Asia – indeed, it seems to have gone on for a very long time. But the scale of contact between the eastern coast of India and South-east Asia was now dramatically increasing.

This continued for many centuries to come. After the Chola incursion, there's growing evidence for

Tamil gold prospecting in the interior of Sumatra (see E. Edwards McKinnon, 'Mediaeval Tamil Involvement in Northern Sumatra, c11–c14 (The Gold and Resin Trade)', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* Vol. 69, No. 1 (270) (1996), pp. 85–99).

40 Jan Wisseman Christie, 'State Formation in Early Maritime Southeast Asia: A Consideration of the Theories and the Data', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde / Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* Vol. 151, No. 2 (1995), pp. 235–88 at p. 252; Coedès, *The Indianised States of Southeast Asia*, pp. 20–1; Chattopadhyaya, *The Making of Early Medieval India*; Devadevan, 'From the Cult of Chivalry to the Cult of Personality', p. 143; Ronald Findlay and Kevin H. O'Rourke, *Power and Plenty: Trade, War, and the World Economy in the Second Millennium* (Princeton, 2007), pp. 33–7.

41 Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Ayutthaya: Siam in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge, 2017), p. 15.

42 Ibid., p. 8.

43 Sureshkumar Muthukumaran stresses how much of the early trade from Egypt to the Mekong was in the hands of Tamil merchants, in *The Tropical Turn: Agricultural Innovation in the Ancient Middle East and the Mediterranean* (Oakland, 2023), p. 104 (see Introduction, note 16).

44 Upinder Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the Twelfth Century* (New Delhi, 2009), pp. 408–10.

45 *Mahājanaka-Jātaka*, no. 539, trans. E. B. Cowell and W. H. D. Rouse, in E. B. Cowell (ed.), *The Jātaka, or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births* (Cambridge, 1907), Vol. VI, pp. 19–37, quoted by Sunil S. Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants* (Cambridge, Mass., 2013), pp. 23–4, and I. W. Mabbett, 'The "Indianization" of Southeast Asia: Reflections on the Historical Sources', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* Vol. 8, No. 2 (September 1977), pp. 143–61. I have slightly updated the language to make it less faux-biblical.

46 This took place in the early Pyu cities of Beikthano and Sri Ksetra. See Janice Stargardt, 'The Great Silver Reliquary from Sri Ksetra: Early Buddhist Art Meets Early Pali Inscriptions in the Pyu Culture of Burma (Myanmar)', in Janice Stargardt and Michael Willis (eds), *Relics and Relic Worship in Early Buddhism: India, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Burma* (London, 2018), pp. 89–105; Goh Geok Yian et al., *Bagan and the World: Early Myanmar and its Global Connections* (Singapore, 2018).

47 Janice Stargardt, 'From the Iron Age to Early Cities at Sri Ksetra and Beikthano, Myanmar', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* Vol. 47, No. 3 (October 2016), pp. 341–65; Miriam T. Stark, 'Landscapes, Linkages, and Luminescence: First-Millennium ce Environmental and Social Change in Mainland Southeast Asia', in Peter C. Bisschop and Elizabeth A. Ceci (eds), *Primary Sources and Asian Pasts: Beyond the Boundaries of the 'Gupta Period'* (Berlin, 2020), pp. 184–219 at pp. 185, 192, 194–5; John N. Miksic and Geok Yian Goh, *Ancient Southeast Asia* (Oxford, 2017), pp. 196–201; G. H. Luce, *Phases of Pre-Pagán Burma: Languages and History*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1985); Suresh Muthukumaran, 'The Tamil Diaspora in Pre-Modern Southeast Asia: A Longue Durée Narrative', in Mahizhnan and Gopal (eds), *Sojourners to Settlers*, Vol. 1, pp. 26–44 at p. 27.

48 Mabbett, 'The "Indianization" of Southeast Asia', pp. 143–61. Sunil Gupta believes the first Buddha images could be even later, and no earlier than the sixth century ce. See Sunil Gupta, 'Evoking the Buddha in Peninsular India, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia', in John Guy (ed.), *Tree & Serpent: Early Buddhist Art in India* (New York, 2023), pp. 166–9.

49 Robert L. Brown, *The Dvaravati Wheels of Law and the Indianization of Southeast Asia* (London, 1996), argues convincingly that the Dvaravati wheels also have a close relationship with, and are 'analogs' to, the sculpture of early Khmer lintels. See also John Guy (ed.), *Lost Kingdoms: Hindu–Buddhist Sculpture of Early Southeast Asia* (New York, 2014), p. 3.

50 Personal communication with Éric Bourdonneau. See Éric Bourdonneau, 'Pour en finir avec la "cité hydraulique"?', *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* Vol. 97–8 (2010–11), pp. 409–37. See also Pierre-Yves Manguin, 'The Archaeology of Funan in the Mekong River Delta: The Oc Eo Culture of Vietnam', in Nancy Tingley (ed.), *Arts of Ancient Viet Nam: From River Plain to Open Sea* (New York, 2010), pp. 100–18.

51 James W. Lankton, 'From Regional to Global: Early Glass and the Development of the Maritime Silk Road', in Franck Billé, Sanjyot Mehendale and James W. Lankton (eds), *The Maritime Silk Road: Global Connectivities, Regional Nodes, Localities* (Amsterdam, 2022), p. 89.

52 Warwick Ball, *Rome in the East: The Transformation of an Empire* (London, 2016), p. 152; Boonyarit Chaisuwan, 'Early Contacts between India and the Andaman Coast in Thailand from the Second

Centurybce to Eleventh Century ce', in Pierre-Yves Manguin, A. Mani and Geoff Wade (eds), *Early Interactions between South and Southeast Asia: Reflections on Cross-Cultural Exchange* (Singapore, 2011), pp. 84–5; Berenice Bellina and Ian Glover, 'The Archaeology of Early Contact with India and the Mediterranean World, from the Fourth Century bc to the Fourth Century ad', in Ian Glover and Peter Bellwood (eds), *Southeast Asia: From Prehistory to History* (London, 2014), p. 73.

53 O. W. Wolters, 'Tambralinga', *Bulletin of the School of Asian and African Studies* Vol. 21, No. 3 (1958), pp. 587–607.

54 Nancy Tingley, 'Introduction', pp. 3, 6, and Andreas Reinecke, 'Early Cultures (First Millennium b.c. to Second Century a.d.)', p. 23, both in Tingley (ed.), *Arts of Ancient Viet Nam.*

55 David L. Snellgrove, *Khmer Civilization and Angkor* (Bangkok, 2001), pp. 8–10.

56 Monica L. Smith, ' "Indianization" from the Indian Point of View: Trade and Cultural Contacts with Southeast Asia in the Early First Millennium c.e.', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* Vol. 42, No. 1 (1999), pp. 1–26 at pp. 5–10; Ray, *Coastal Shrines and Transnational Maritime Networks across India and Southeast Asia*, pp. 13, 46, 66–7; Christie, 'State Formation in Early Maritime Southeast Asia', pp. 235–88; Stark, 'Landscapes, Linkages, and Luminescence'.

57 Pierre-Yves Manguin, 'Trading Ships of the South China Sea: Shipbuilding Techniques and their Role in the History of the Development of Asian Trade Networks', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* Vol. 36, No. 3 (1993), pp. 253–80.

58 Tansen Sen, *India, China and the World: A Connected History* (London, 2017), pp. 47, 119–20; Paul Wheatley, *The Golden Khersonese: Studies in the Historical Geography of the Malay Peninsula before a.d. 1500* (Kuala Lumpur, 1961), pp. 114–15; Kenneth R. Hall, 'Economic History of Early Southeast Asia', in Nicholas Tarling (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, Vol. 1, Part One: *From Early Times to c.1500* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 183–275 at pp. 194–5.

59 For a good introduction to the development and diffusion of Tamil-Brahmi see K. Rajan, 'Evolution of the Tamil Script: An Essential Beginning', in Mahizhnan and Gopal (eds), *Sojourners to Settlers*, Vol. 1, pp. 1–22.

60 Robert L. Brown, 'The Trouble with Convergence', in Anna L. Dallapiccola and Anila Verghese (eds), *India and Southeast Asia: Cultural Discourses* (Mumbai, 2017), pp. 37–51; Robert L. Brown, ' "Rules" for Change in the Transfer of Indian Art to Southeast Asia', in Marijke J. Klokke and Pauline Lunsingh Scheurleer (eds), *Ancient Indonesian Sculpture* (Leiden, 1994), pp. 10–32.

61 John Guy, 'Shiva's Land: Understanding the Religious Landscape of Early Southeast Asia', in Shyam Saran (ed.), *Cultural and Civilisational Links between India and Southeast Asia: Historical and Contemporary Dimensions* (New Delhi, 2018), pp. 253–74. That said, figures or faces on lingas predate the lingodbhava myth. For textual accounts of the myth, see Kafle, Nirajan, 'The Liṅgodbhava Myth in Early Śaiva Sources' in *Puṣpikā. Tracing Ancient India through Texts and Traditions. Contributions to Current Research in Indology Volume 1*, Nina Mirnig, Péter-Dániel Szántó, and Michael Williams (eds), n 241–63 (Oxford/ Havertown Pennsylvania, 2013).

62 Miriam T. Stark, 'Angkor Borei and the Archaeology of Cambodia's Mekong Delta', in James C. M. Khoo (ed.), *Art and Archaeology of Fu Nan: Pre-Khmer Kingdom of the Lower Mekong Valley* (Bangkok, 2003), pp. 87–105; Philip Rawson, *The Art of Southeast Asia* (New York, 1967), p. 23; Michael D. Coe and Damian Evans, *Angkor and the Khmer Civilization* (London, 2018), p. 92; David Snellgrove, *Angkor – Before and After: A Cultural History of the Khmers* (Bangkok, 2004), p. 51.

63 Pierre-Yves Manguin, 'Early Coastal States in Southeast Asia: Funan and Srivijaya', in Guy (ed.), *Lost Kingdoms*, pp. 111–15; Mireille Bensiti, *Rapports entre le premier art khmer et l'art indien*, 2 vols (Paris, 1970); Daigoro Chihara, *Hindu–Buddhist Architecture in Southeast Asia* (Leiden, 1996), pp. 47, 61–3, 67, 72–5; Stark, 'Landscapes, Linkages, and Luminescence', p. 185; Manguin, 'The Archaeology of Funan in the Mekong River Delta'.

64 The quote is taken from Gunavarman's entry in Robert E. Buswell Jr and Donald S. Lopez Jr (eds), *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (Princeton, 2014), pp. 337–8. See also Tansen Sen, 'Buddhism and Maritime Crossings', in Dorothy C. Wong and Gustav Heldt (eds), *China and Beyond in the Mediaeval Period: Cultural Crossings and Inter-Regional Connections* (Amherst, 2014), pp. 44–5; Malini Saran and Vinod C. Khanna, *The Ramayana in Indonesia* (New Delhi, 2004), p. 24; Himanshu Bhusan Sarkar, 'The Migration of the *Rāmāyaṇa* Story to Indonesia', in V. Raghavan (ed.), *The Rāmāyaṇa Tradition in Asia* (New Delhi, 1980), pp. 103–21; O. W. Wolters, *Early Indonesian Commerce: A Study of the Origins of Srivijaya* (Ithaca, NY, 1967), pp. 35, 152, 246; Swati Chemburkar, 'Borobudur's Pāla Forebear? A Field Note from Kesariya, Bihar, India', in Andrea Acri (ed.), *Esoteric Buddhism in Mediaeval Maritime Asia:*

Networks of Masters, Texts, Icons (Singapore, 2016), pp. 191–210.

65 John Guy, 'Tamil Merchants and the Hindu–Buddhist Diaspora', in Manguin, Mani and Wade (eds), *Early Interactions between South and Southeast Asia*, pp. 243–62 at p. 253; Sen, 'Buddhism and Maritime Crossings', p. 48.

66 The carving can still be seen in a cave at Tham Phra Phothi. There is a striking illustration in Guy (ed.), *Lost Kingdoms*, p. 6. See also Baker and Phongpaichit, *A History of Ayuttha*, p. 11. There are inscriptions in the new Pyu state in Myanmar from 688 ce attached to the earliest Burmese pagoda which was built in the capital at Srikesetra and which seems to be closely modelled on the stupa at Amaravati on the Andhra coast. See Pamela Gutman and Bob Hudson, 'The Archaeology of Burma (Myanmar) from Neolithic to Pagan', in Glover and Bellwood (eds), *Southeast Asia*, pp. 149–76 at pp. 160–1; Janice Stargardt, 'Sri Ksetra 3rd Century bce to 6th Century ce: Indianization, Synergies, Creation', in Bisschop and Ceci (eds), *Primary Sources and Asian Pasts*, pp. 220–65; Chihara, *Hindu–Buddhist Architecture in Southeast Asia*, p. 8.

67 Baker and Phongpaichit, *A History of Ayuttha*, pp. 10–11.

68 Nancy Tingley (ed.), *Arts of Ancient Viet Nam: From River Plain to Open Sea* (New York, 2010), p. 160.

69 Interestingly, the iconography of the mitred Vishnu seems to owe nothing to South India, for the mitre seems to be inherited from the Guptas. In the Tamil-speaking south, Vishnu's headgear is cylindrical instead.

70 Ibid., p. 156; T. S. Maxwell, 'Religion at the Time of Jayavarman VII', in Joyce Clark (ed.), *Bayon: New Perspectives* (Bangkok, 2007), pp. 72–135 at pp. 81–3; S. J. O'Connor Jr, 'Hindu Gods of Peninsular Siam', *Artibus Asiae Supplementum* Vol. 28 (1972), pp. 34–7.

71 There is a huge bibliography on the 'Indianised' art of South-east Asia, starting with Indian writers of the 1930s who saw the adoption of Indian forms as a type of cultural colonisation through to post-colonial South-east Asian writers who completely rejected any notion of 'Indianisation'. Good summaries can be found in the conclusion of Robert L. Brown's *The Dvaravati Wheels of Law and the Indianization of Southeast Asia*, and also in his essay 'The Trouble with Convergence', pp. 37–51. See also Guy (ed.), *Lost Kingdoms*, p. 6; Maxwell, 'Religion at the Time of Jayavarman VII', pp. 72–122; and *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, Vol. 1: *Regions, Pilgrimage, Deities*, ed. Helene Basu, Angelika Malinar and Vasudha Narayanan (Leiden, 2009), pp. 337–81.

72 At the Krishna Mandapa. Ray, *Coastal Shrines and Transnational Maritime Networks across India and Southeast Asia*, p. 131; Sonya Rhie Mace, 'The Cleveland Krishna: Image, Site and Provenance', in Sonya Rhie Mace and Bertrand Porte (eds), *Revealing Krishna: Essays on the History, Context and Conservation of Krishna Lifting Mount Goverdhan from Phnom Da* (Cleveland, 2021), p. 33.

73 The idea that the Krishna was originally installed in the cave at Phnom Da, and that the site may mark the sacred spot where Kaundinya and Mera met, has been convincingly argued by Sonya Rhie Mace in her brilliant essay 'The Cleveland Krishna', esp. p. 43. George Coedès, 'Études cambodgiennes: la légende de la Nagi', *Bulletin de l'École francaise d'Extrême-Orient* Vol. 11 (1911), pp. 311–93.

74 Coe and Evans, *Angkor and the Khmer Civilization*, pp. 94–6.

75 Dominic Goodall, 'What Information Can Be Gleaned from Cambodian Inscriptions about Practices Relating to the Transmission of Sanskrit Literature?', in Vincenzo Vergiani, Daniele Cuneo and Camillo Alessio Formigatti (eds), *Indic Manuscript Cultures through the Ages*, Vol. 14 (Berlin, 2017), pp. 131–62, esp. p. 131; Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men*, p. 234; Saran and Khanna, *The Ramayana in Indonesia*, p. 10.

76 Maxwell, 'Religion at the Time of Jayavarman VII', p. 121.

77 Swati Chemburkar, 'Introduction', in *Art of Cambodia: Interactions with India*, *Marg: A Magazine of the Arts* Vol. 67, No. 2 (December 2015–March 2016), pp. 10–19 at pp. 13, 16.

78 Julie Romain, 'Indian Architecture in the "Sanskrit Cosmopolis": The Temples of the Dieng Plateau', in Manguin, Mani and Wade (eds), *Early Interactions between South and Southeast Asia*, pp. 299–316; Chihara, *Hindu–Buddhist Architecture in Southeast Asia*, pp. 98–112; John N. Miksic, 'The Classical Cultures of Indonesia', in Ian Glover and Peter Bellwood (eds), *Southeast Asia: From Prehistory to History* (London, 2014), p. 240. Sonya Rhie Mace in 'The Cleveland Krishna' argues for a very early date and the influence of architectural models from Orissa on the temple known today as Ashram Maha Rosei midway up the hill at Phnom Da.

Suresh Muthukumaran mentions another echo on the architecture of Mahaballipuram in South-east Asia, a seventh-century bronze censer in the form of a miniature temple from Kedah in the Malay

peninsula which has a very similar roofline to the Pallava Bhima Ratha: see Muthukumaran, 'The Tamil Diaspora in Pre-Modern Southeast Asia', p. 33. In the same books of essays, Andrea Acri writes on the cult of Agastya: Acri, 'Hinduism in Pre-Modern Southeast Asia', p. 6.

79 Romain, 'Indian Architecture in the "Sanskrit Cosmopolis" ', pp. 299–316.

80 A point nicely made in Chapter 5 of Amitav Acharya's *Civilizations in Embrace: The Spread of Ideas and the Transformation of Power – India and Southeast Asia in the Classical Age* (Singapore, 2013). See also Thomas M. Hunter, 'The Building Blocks: Old Javanese Ramayana and the Founding of a New Literary Language', in Bronner (ed.), *A Lasting Vision*, pp. 419–21; George Michell, *The Hindu Temple: An Introduction to its Meaning and Forms* (Chicago, 1988); and George Michell, *Hindu Art and Architecture* (London, 2000).

81 At least that seems the most likely hypothesis: scholars are still not completely sure whether the ruins are those of a palace, of a monastery, or both. Andrea Acri, 'The Place of Nusantara in the Sanskritic Buddhist Cosmopolis', *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* Vol. 6, No. 2 (2018), pp. 139–66 at p. 150; Acri (ed.), *Esoteric Buddhism in Mediaeval Maritime Asia*, Introduction, p. 17; Sen, 'Buddhism and Maritime Crossings', p. 53; Jacques Dumarçay, *Borobudur* (Oxford, 1978), p. 11; Robin A. E. Coningham, Mark Manuel, Christopher Davis and Prishanta Gunawardhana, 'Archaeology and Cosmopolitanism in Early Historic and Medieval Sri Lanka', in Zoltán Biedermann and Alan Strathern (eds), *Sri Lanka at the Crossroads of History* (London, 2017), pp. 19–43.

82 Hirananda Sastri's text of the inscription can be found in 'The Nālandā Copper-Plate of Devapāladeva', *Epigraphia Indica* Vol. 17 (1923–4), pp. 310–27; and in Hirananda Sastri, *Nālandā and its Epigraphic Material: Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India* (Delhi, 1942), p. 95. See also Andrea Acri and Peter Sharrock (eds), *The Creative South: Buddhist and Hindu Art in Medieval Maritime Asia* (Singapore, 2022), Introduction, Vol. 2, p. 6; Swati Chemburkar, 'Visualising the Buddhist Mandala: Kesariya, Borobudur and Tabo', in Dallapiccola and Verghese (eds), *India and Southeast Asia*, pp. 198–222; Saran and Khanna, *The Ramayana in Indonesia*, p. 25.

83 This case is well argued by Andrea Acri, 'Revisiting the Monsoon Asia Idea: Old Problems and New Directions', in David Henley and Nira Wickramasinghe (eds), *Monsoon Asia: A Reader on South and Southeast Asia* (Leiden, 2023), pp. 63–96. See also, with regard specifically to Buddhism, the ideas of Hiram Woodward in his 'Esoteric Buddhism in Southeast Asia in the Light of Recent Scholarship', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* Vol. 35, No. 2 (June 2004), pp. 329–54 at p. 353. Also Muthukumaran, 'The Tamil Diaspora in Pre-Modern Southeast Asia', p. 27.

7: In the Lands of Gold

1 Stewart Gordon, *When Asia was the World* (Bury St Edmunds, 2008), pp. 59–60.

2 Michael Flecker, *The Archaeological Excavation of the 10th Century Intan Shipwreck* (London, 2002).

3 Gordon, *When Asia was the World*, pp. 57–73.

4 John N. Miksic, *Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea, 1300–1800* (Singapore, 2013), p. 86.

5 The case for recognising the extraordinary creativity of South-east Asia at this period is well made by Andrea Acri and Peter Sharrock in their brilliant two-volume collection of studies, *The Creative South: Buddhist and Hindu Art in Medieval Maritime Asia* (Singapore, 2022). As they write in their Introduction, 'Current research shows that the Southeastern Asian "peripheries" were freer to innovate than the traditional "centres", while the flourishing trade routes provided them with the necessary flow of human and material resources. As a result, the early kingdoms of Maritime Asia became the wellsprings of cults, ritual technologies, sacred art and architecture … The scale and artistic originality manifested in the monumental ritual centres in Java, the Malay Peninsula, Campā [Vietnam], and the Khmer domains [Cambodia] are striking evidence for the religious and political novelties devised and implemented in the South. The direct access Buddhist and Śaiva masters were afforded to the royal courts of the emerging Southern states – access which went beyond that achieved from the Buddhists' monastic confines in the subcontinent – opened the way to the construction of monuments on an unprecedented scale.' Acri and Sharrock (eds), *Creative South*, Introduction, Vol. 1, p. 1.

6 Andrea Acri, 'The Place of Nusantara in the Sanskritic Buddhist Cosmopolis', *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* Vol. 6, No. 2 (2018), pp. 139–66.

7 Some sources differ on this and name his father as the 'South Indian Brahmina teacher and Indian King'. See Robert E. Buswell Jr and Donald S. Lopez (eds), *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (Princeton, 2014), pp. 952–3.

8 Jeffrey Sundberg (in collaboration with Ralph Giebel), 'The Life of the Tang Court Monk Vajrabodhi as Chronicled by Lü Xiang: South Indian and Śrī Laṅkān Antecedents to the Arrival of the Buddhist Vajrayāna in Eighth-Century Java and China', *Pacific World: Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies* 3rd Series, No. 13 (2011), pp. 129–222.

9 Narasimha was a great builder, musician and intellectual in the mould of his forebear Mahendravarman. He had a particular interest in Shaiva Tantra, of which he was an initiate, and he built his own Tantric temple in Kanchipuram, the great Kailasanatha which stands today as arguably the supreme masterpiece of the Pallava dynasty. See Padma Kaimal, *Opening Kailasanatha: The Temple in Kanchipuram Revealed in Time and Space* (Washington, DC, 2020); R. Nagaswamy, 'Innovative Emperor and his Personal Chapel: Eighth Century Kanchipuram', in Vidya Dehejia (ed.), *Royal Patrons and Great Temple Art* (Bombay, 1988), pp. 37–60.

10 Swati Chemburkar, 'Borobudur's Pāla Forebear? A Field Note from Kesariya, Bihar, India', in Andrea Acri (ed.), *Esoteric Buddhism in Mediaeval Maritime Asia: Networks of Masters, Texts, Icons* (Singapore, 2016), pp. 191–210 at p. 217.

11 Ibid.; Acri (ed.), *Esoteric Buddhism in Mediaeval Maritime Asia*, Introduction, pp. 15–17.

12 Sundberg (in collaboration with Giebel), 'The Life of the Tang Court Monk Vajrabodhi as Chronicled by Lü Xiang', pp. 129–222.

13 Ibid.

14 Peter D. Sharrock and Emma C. Bunker, 'Seeds of Vajrabodhi: Buddhist Ritual Bronzes from Java and Khorat', in Acri (ed.), *Esoteric Buddhism in Mediaeval Maritime Asia*, pp. 237–52 at pp. 239–40.

15 Kenneth R. Hall, *A History of Early Southeast Asia: Maritime Trade and Societal Development, 100–1500* (Plymouth, 2011). I would like to thank Anirudh Kanisetti for showing me the Srivijaya manuscript of his forthcoming Chola history, where I first encountered this ritual.

16 Kenneth R. Hall, *Maritime Trade and State Development in Early Southeast Asia* (Honolulu, 1985), pp. 72–7; Kenneth R. Hall, 'Economic History of Early Southeast Asia', in Nicholas Tarling (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, Vol. 1, Part One: *From Early Times to c.1500* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 183–275 at pp. 196–208; Tansen Sen, 'Buddhism and Maritime Crossings', in Dorothy C. Wong and Gustav Heldt (eds), *China and Beyond in the Mediaeval Period: Cultural Crossings and Inter-Regional Connections* (Amherst, 2014), pp. 45–8; Paul Michel Munoz, *Early Kingdoms: Indonesian Archipelago and the Malay Peninsula* (Singapore, 2006), pp. 117–23.

17 Yijing quoted in Sen, 'Buddhism and Maritime Crossings', p. 50; Munoz, *Early Kingdoms*, pp. 122–3; Rila Mukherjee, 'The Indian Ocean World of Srivijaya', in Kenneth Hall, Suchandra Ghosh, Kaushik Gangopadhyay and Rila Mukherjee (eds), *Cross-Cultural Networking in the Indian Ocean Realm, c.100–1800* (Delhi, 2019), pp. 170–97.

18 Hiram Woodward, 'Esoteric Buddhism in Southeast Asia in the Light of Recent Scholarship', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* Vol. 35, No. 2 (June 2004), pp. 329–54 at pp. 338–9.

19 Zhou Yiliang gives an annotated translation of the standard biographies of Vajrabodhi, Subhakarasimha and Amoghavajra in his 'Tantrism in China', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* Vol. 8 (March 1945), pp. 241–332. See also *The Instructions on the Gate of Teaching about the Secret State of Mind of the Great Yoga, the Vajra Pinnacle Scripture*, quoted in Martin Lehnert, 'Tantric Threads between India and China', in Ann Heirman and Stephan Peter Bumbacher (eds), *The Spread of Buddhism* (Leiden, 2012), p. 258. Andrea Acri has also discussed this and similar passages in 'Navigating the "Southern Seas", Miraculously: Avoidance of Shipwreck in Buddhist Narratives of Maritime Crossings', in Marina Berthet, Fernando Rosa and Shaun Viljoen (eds), *Moving Spaces: Creolisation and Mobility in Africa, the Atlantic and Indian Ocean* (Leiden/Boston, 2019), pp. 50–77.

20 It is not entirely clear if the monks were together at this point. Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade: The Realignment of India–China Relations, 600–1400* (London, 2016), p. 224.

21 Edward H. Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study in T'ang Exotics* (Berkeley, 1967), p. 276.

22 Lehnert, 'Tantric Threads between India and China', pp. 262–5.

23 Yury Khokhlov, 'In the Footsteps of Amoghavajra (705–774): Southern Indian Artistic Mode in Tang China and its Transmission to Tibet', in Acri and Sharrock (eds), *The Creative South*, Vol. 2, pp. 66–125; Hiram Woodward, 'Stylistic Trends in Mainland Southeast Asia, 600–800', in John Guy (ed.), *Lost Kingdoms: Hindu–Buddhist Sculpture of Early Southeast Asia* (New York, 2014), pp. 128 and 250–1.

24 'Last Testament of Amoghavajra', quoted by Geoffrey Goble, 'The Politics of Esoteric Buddhism:

Amoghavajra and the Tang State', in Acri (ed.), *Esoteric Buddhism in Mediaeval Maritime Asia*, pp. 123–39 at pp. 125–6.

25 Valerie Hansen, 'Gods on Walls: A Case of Indian Influence on Chinese Lay Religion?', in Patricia Buckley Ebrey and Peter N. Gregory, *Religion and Society in T'ang and Sung China* (Honolulu, 1993), pp. 75–114 at pp. 82–3.

26 There are huge, long-running debates about almost everything to do with Borobudur: even whether it was a *mandala* at all, and if esoteric concepts were encoded there in stone. I belong to the group of those who believe both these propositions. In any case, both esoteric and exoteric concepts are represented: for example, the lower galleries with the Buddha and Bodhisattva lives, which reflect a rather classical Mahayana view.

27 John Miksic, *Borobudur: Golden Tales of the Buddhas* (Hong Kong, 1990), p. 49.

28 Hudaya Kandahjaya, 'The Scheme of Borobudur', in Acri and Sharrock (eds), *The Creative South*, Vol. 2, pp. 55–73.

29 According to a new thesis of Hudaya Kandahjaya, set out in ibid., Borobudur is now seen to embed the Yogatantra *garbhadhatumandala* of deities, as well as the apex of the *vajradhatumandala*, the two cosmograms that defined a Buddhist metaphysical hierarchy that would spread across Asia from the eighth century. While Kandahjaya's hypothesis remains to be validated by Buddhological scholarship, I for one think that it sounds plausible. See also Sen, 'Buddhism and Maritime Crossings', p. 51; Miksic, *Borobudur*, p. 21; Chemburkar, 'Borobudur's Pāla Forebear?', pp. 217–18.

30 Sundberg (in collaboration with Giebel), 'The Life of the Tang Court Monk Vajrabodhi as Chronicled by Lü Xiang', pp. 132–3.

31 Iain Sinclair, 'Coronation and Liberation According to a Javanese Monk in China: Bianhong's Manual on the *abhiṣeka* of a *cakravartin*', in Acri (ed.), *Esoteric Buddhism in Mediaeval Maritime Asia*, pp. 29–66.

32 If Bianhong did not return to Java, as Iain Sinclair has argued, then the Javanese Buddhist circle that built Borobudur were well aware of the esoteric Chinese Buddhist developments of which he was a part. 'Looking at all sides of Borobudur there are 108 Buddha statues in niches on each side facing each cardinal direction. Also, the outline of the horizontal layout or the shape of all polygonal platforms on rectangular terraces resembles the shape of the vajra lines as described by Vajrabuddhi. As such, it is likely that the architects of Borobudur utilized Vajrabuddhi's manual from the start for the horizontal planning, in addition to the stūpa construction manual for the vertical planning.' Kandahjaya, 'The Scheme of Borobudur', pp. 14–15. D. Dennis Hudson, *The Body of God: An Emperor's Palace for Krishna in Eighth-Century Kanchipuram* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 70–1.

33 Chemburkar, 'Borobudur's Pāla Forebear?', pp. 191–210.

34 Miksic, *Borobudur*, p. 45.

35 Hiram Woodward, 'Bianhong, Mastermind of Borobudur?', *Pacific World: Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies* 3rd Series, No. 11 (Fall 2009), pp. 25–62, and Chemburkar, 'Borobudur's Pāla Forebear?' Chemburkar writes, 'Like Borobudur, Kesariya's design combines three elements: a natural hill, a stūpa, and a maṇḍala. Both monuments present themselves to the viewer as horizontally flattened. Anyone standing at the base of either monument cannot see the topmost stūpa. Much like the stūpa of Borobudur, Kesariya has a certain numerological configuration of brick chambers on each terrace at regular intervals with a life-size Buddha statue positioned in them. Atop the fifth terrace rises the stūpa to a height of 9.38 metres and 22 metres in diameter. The exposed terraced structure of the monument measures 123 metres in diameter and 37.5 metres in height. The length and height of Borobudur are almost the same as Kesariya.'

36 Hudaya Kandahjaya, 'A Study on the Origin and Significance of Borobudur' (PhD thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 2004); Kandahjaya, 'The Scheme of Borobudur'; Hiram Woodward, 'On Borobudur's Upper Terraces', *Oriental Art* Vol. 45, No. 3 (1999), pp. 34–43; Dumarçay, *Borobudur*, p. 40; Miksic, *Borobudur*; Neil MacGregor, *A History of the World in 100 Objects* (London, 2010), pp. 379–84; Chihara, *Hindu–Buddhist Architecture in Southeast Asia*, pp. 113–24.

37 Paul William, *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (Oxford, 1989), p. 146; Tim Hannigan, *A Brief History of Indonesia: Sultans, Spices and Tsunamis: The Incredible Story of Southeast Asia's Largest Nation* (Hong Kong, 2015).

38 More recently translated by D. E. Osto as *The Supreme Array Scripture* (Massey, 2021).

39 The text is called the *Gandavyuha Sutra*, which itself forms a part of a collection called the

Avatamsakasutra. Sudhana is always shown with a manuscript which he holds clasped under his left armpit, and on his quest he even visits Lord Shiva, who is shown four-armed, deep in meditation on Mount Kailash with trident and rosary. The tale was a favourite of the esoteric Buddhist masters associated with both Nalanda and Kanchipuram, the latter of whom were known to maintain unusually strong links with Hindu Shaiva Tantrics, which would explain the unexpected presence of Lord Shiva on a Buddhist monument. The same text also appears in the decorations of the Indian Himalayan monastery of Tabo built by Atisa, another Indian monk who spent his life with the Tantric Buddhists of Nalanda and Srivijaya. See Himanshu Prabha Ray, *Archaeology and Buddhism in South Asia* (Oxford, 2018), p. 98. An autographed manuscript of the *Gandavyuha* is said to have been presented to the Chinese Emperor in 795 ce by an Orissan king, generally accepted as being a member of the Bhaumakara dynasty. On arrival it is immediately translated by Prajna, an Indian monk who flourished in China from 785 to 810. His translation may have been the one used by the sculptors and epigraphers of Borobudur. Himanshu Prabha Ray, *Coastal Shrines and Transnational Maritime Networks across India and Southeast Asia* (London, 2020), p. 168; Chemburkar, 'Borobudur's Pāla Forebear?', pp. 218–19, which notes links between Ratnagiri and Borobudur via the cult of Manjushri and Samantabhadra; Woodward, 'Bianhong, Mastermind of Borobudur?', p. 27. Padma Kaimal, in her *Opening Kailasanatha*, shows how Narasimha absorbs Buddhist ideas in his Tantric temple.

40 Woodward, 'Bianhong, Mastermind of Borobudur?', pp. 37–8, 41, 44, 47.

41 Jan Fontein, 'The *Śarīra* of Borobudur', in Marijke J. Klokke and Karel R. van Kooij (eds), *Fruits of Inspiration: Studies in Honour of Prof. J. G. de Casparis* (Groningen, 2001), pp. 83–91.

8: 'He Who is Protected by the Sun'

1 Hermann Kulke, 'The Devarāja Cult: Legitimation and Apotheosis of the Ruler in the Kingdom of Angkor', in Kulke, *Kings and Cults: State Formation and Legitimation in India and Southeast Asia* (New Delhi, 1993), pp. 327–81.

2 Or Si Thet, as argued by Hiram Woodward, 'Bianhong, Mastermind of Borobudur?', *Pacific World: Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies* 3rd Series, No. 11 (Fall 2009), pp. 25–60.

3 Much of the political history of Cambodia at this period rests on the shaky evidence of a handful of inscriptions, especially one notably controversial and much later inscription dating from 1052, 250 years after the events it describes. The inscription, found at the temple site of Sdok Kak Thom is particularly tendentious because it could well be weaving a revisionist narrative about a particular priestly family's claim to power at court from centuries later. But it is the best evidence we have, in the absence of clearer facts, most scholars have cautiously chosen to accept it. In particular, that Jayavarman II began the empire of Angkor in 802 after exile was once considered an established historical fact based on the inscription of Sdok Kak Thom. This changed when two scholars challenged it in the 1990s. Claude Jacques of the EFEO and the Cambodian-based American scholar Michael Vickery pointed out that Java might mean somewhere quite different. This interpretation has in turn been challenged by the epigrapher Arlo Griffiths, who argued strongly, and in my view highly convincingly, that Java does indeed mean Java. There is a good summary of the debate in Michael D. Coe and Damian Evans, *Angkor and the Khmer Civilization* (London, 2018), pp. 115–21. See Arlo Griffiths, 'The Problem of the Ancient Name of Java and the Role of Satyavarman in Southeast Asian International Relations around the Turn of the Ninth Century ce', *Archipel* Vol. 85 (2013), pp. 42–81. For Jacques' position see the following papers: Claude Jacques, 'Études d'épigraphie cambodgienne, VIII. La carrière de Jayavarman II', *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* Vol. 69 (1972), pp. 205–20; Claude Jacques, 'On Jayavarman II, the Founder of the Khmer Empire', *Southeast Asian Archaeology 1990: Proceedings of the 3rd Conference of the European Association of Southeast Asian Archaeologists* (Hull, 1992), pp. 1–5; Claude Jacques, 'Les Noms posthumes des rois dans l'ancien Cambodge', in Marijke J. Klokke and Karel R. van Kooij, *Fruits of Inspiration: Studies in Honour of Prof. J. G. de Casparis* (Groningen, 2001), pp. 191–8; Claude Jacques, 'Deux Problèmes posés par l'inscription de la stèle de Praḥ Khan K. 908', *Aséanie* Vol. 15 (2005), pp. 11–32. For Vickery see his *Society, Economics, and Politics in Pre-Angkor Cambodia: The 7th–8th Centuries* (Tokyo, 1998). Also Michael Vickery, 'Resolving the Chronology and History of 9th Century Cambodia', *Siksācakr* No. 3 (2001), pp. 17–23. One further debate: Dominic Goodall and Nicolas Revire have queried if Jayavrman II was actually behaving in such an innovative fashion and has pointed to the empire of Isanavarman I as being an important 7th century precedent: Goodall, Dominic, and Nicolas Revire. 2021. 'East and West — New Inscriptions

from Funan, Zhenla and Dvāravatī'. Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient 107:257–301. Other scholars maintain that it is not really clear if Jayavarman II can actually be said to be the founder of Angkor because of the pre-Angkorian remains of Ak Yum, which may have been the Śaiva temple of Gambhīreśvara founded by Bhavavarman around 600 inside the embankment of the Western Baray: see Pottier, Christophe. 2017. 'Nouvelles données sur les premières cités angkoriennes'. In Deux décennies de coopération archéologique franco-cambodgienne à Angkor. Actes de la journée d'études organisée à la mémoire de Pascal Royère (1965–2014), sous le haut patronage de Sa Majesté NORODOM Sihamoni, Roi du Cambodge, ed. Azedine Beschaouch, Franciscus Verellen et Michel Zink, 43–79. Paris: Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres. Not everybody is convinced by all Pottier's arguments, but he builds an impressive case.

4 Goodall, Dominic. 'Two inscriptions from Liṅgaparvata (Vat Phu), one dating to Jayavarman I's reign (K. 1059) and the other to Jayavarman II's (K. 1060), along with a re-edition of K. 762' Udaya: Journal of Khmer Studies, 2021, 15, pp. 3–38.

5 Coe and Evans, *Angkor and the Khmer Civilization*, pp. 115–21; O. W. Wolters, 'Jayavarman II's Military Power: The Territorial Foundation of the Angkor Empire', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* No. 1 (1973), pp. 21–30; Charles Higham, *The Civilization of Angkor* (London, 2001), pp. 53–9; Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, Vol. 1: *Integration of the Mainland: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c.800–1830* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 217–18; Ian Mabbett and David Chandler, *The Khmers* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 87–90; John N. Miksic and Geok Yian Goh, *Ancient Southeast Asia* (Oxford, 2017), pp. 268–71.

6 There is another long and tangled historiographical debate about who, or what, is the Devaraja. See Kulke, 'The Devarāja Cult'. See also Mabbett and Chandler, *The Khmers*, pp. 89–90; David Snellgrove, *Angkor – Before and After: A Cultural History of the Khmers* (Bangkok, 2004), pp. 48–51; Daigoro Chihara, *Hindu–Buddhist Architecture in Southeast Asia* (Leiden, 1996), pp. 23–5; Eleanor Mannikka, *Angkor Wat: Time, Space, and Kingship* (Honolulu, 1996), pp. 6–7.

7 Vickery, *Society, Economics, and Politics in Pre-Angkor Cambodia*, pp. 143, 300, 404–6; Claude Jacques, 'Sources on Economic Activities in Khmer and Cham Lands', in David G. Marr and A. C. Milner, *Southeast Asia in the 9th to 14th Centuries* (Singapore, 1986), pp. 327–34 at pp. 331–2; Robert S. Wicks, *Money, Markets, and Trade in Early Southeast* Asia (Ithaca, NY, 1992), pp. 183–209.

8 That said, the carvings of Kbal Spean are in Baphuon style, dating from the 11th–12th century, so long after Jayavarman II.

9 The readership of the Dharmashastras was presumably limited to literate Brahmin males.

10 For a brilliant discussion about prohibitions on travel in *The Laws of Manu*, the Dharmashastras and some of the Puranas see Vasudha Narayanan, 'Creating a South Indian "Hindu" Experience in the United States', in Raymond Bradley Williams (ed.), *A Sacred Thread: Modern Transmission of Hindu Tradition in India and Abroad* (Chambersburg, Pa, 1992), pp. 147–76 at p. 147. The notion that crossing the 'Black Water' was a 'problem' is referred to here and there in secondary literature, but most of the writings on that debate belonged in fact to the eighteenth and nineteenth century, since there are only a few early mentions that problematise the practice, and they don't seem to reflect a majority view. There is a small Hamburg thesis on the subject entiled 'Zur Frage des Seefahrtsverbot in den Dharmaśāstras' by Sushmita Mallick (1993).

11 Alexis Sanderson, 'The Śaiva Religion among the Khmers (Part I)', *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* Vol. 90–1 (2003–4), pp. 349–462 at pp. 401–2.

12 The story of Kaudinya was first written down by the Chinese visitors Kang Tai and Zhu Ying in the third century and first translated by Paul Pelliot in 'Le Fou-nan', *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* Vol. 3 (1903), p. 252. It also appears in a tenth-century inscription in Baksei Chamkrong Temple (c.968 ce). See also Sambit Datta and David Beynon, *Digital Archetypes: Adaptations of Early Temple Architecture in South and Southeast Asia* (Oxford, 2016), p. 102; *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, Vol. 1, p. 347; Noboru Karashima, *A Concise History of South India: Issues and Interpretations* (London, 2014); David Abulafia, *The Boundless Sea: A Human History of the Oceans* (London, 2019), pp. 140–1; Michael D. Rabe, 'The Māmallapuram Praśasti: A Panegyric in Figures', *Artibus Asiae* Vol. 57, No. 3–4 (1997), pp. 189–241.

13 *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, Vol. 1, p. 347.

14 Daud Ali, 'The Early Inscriptions of Indonesia and the Problems of the Sanskrit Cosmopolis', in Pierre-Yves Manguin, A. Mani and Geoff Wade (eds), *Early Interactions between South and Southeast Asia: Reflections on Cross-Cultural Exchange* (Singapore, 2011), pp. 277–98 at p. 282; André Wink, *Al-Hind:*

The Making of the Indo-Islamic World, Vol. 1: *Early Medieval India and the Expansion of Islam, 7th–11th Centuries* (Leiden, 2002), pp. 336–8; Peter Skilling, 'King, *Sangha* and Brahmans: Ideology, Ritual and Power in Pre-Modern Siam', in Ian Harris (ed.), *Buddhism, Power and the Political Order* (London, 2007), pp. 182–215.

15 Kamaleshwar Bhattacharya, 'The Religions of Ancient Cambodia, in Helen Ibbitson Jessup and Thierry Zephir (eds), *Sculpture of Angkor and Ancient Cambodia: Millennium of Glory* (Washington, DC, 1997), p. 37; Paul Wheatley, *The Golden Khersonese: Studies in the Historical Geography of the Malay Peninsula before a.d. 1500* (Kuala Lumpur, 1961), p. 17; Tom Hoogervorst, *Southeast Asia in the Ancient Indian Ocean World* (London, 2013), p. 15.

16 Sanderson, 'The Śaiva Religion among the Khmers (Part I)', p. 401.

17 The ceremony is called *abhisheka* in Sanskrit.

18 Guy, 'Shiva's Land', pp. 263–4.

19 There are more details about the Indian discovery of zero in Chapter 8, as well as about its early deployment in South-east Asia. See also Amir D. Aczel, *Finding Zero: A Mathematician's Odyssey to Uncover the Origins of Numbers* (New York, 2016).

20 John Guy, 'Introducing Early Southeast Asia', in Guy (ed.), *Lost Kingdoms*, pp. 4–6; *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, Vol. 1, p. 346; Coe and Evans, *Angkor and the Khmer Civilization*, pp. 80–3. The word 'varman' primarily refers to defensive armour or to a cuirass, and so one analysis of Rudravarman would be 'who has Rudra as his armour'. -varman is simply a conventional suffix (following Manu) used in names received by kings at the moment of their royal consecration, and that 'having Rudra as armour' is just one possible playful analysis after the fact. But we do indeed find precisely this analysis for the name Īśānavarman I in the beginning of K. 1150 (seventh-century). It is however juxtaposed with another analysis according to which the king is also himself the 'Cuirass of Īśāna', in the sense that the king holds the god in his heart (and thus within his chest) to meditate upon Him. See pp. 66–68 of Goodall, Dominic. 2019. 'Nobles, Bureaucrats Or Strongmen? On The "Vassal Kings" or "Hereditary Governors" of Pre-Angkorian City-States: Two Sanskrit Inscriptions of Vidyāviśeṣa, Seventh-Century Governor of Tamandarapura (K. 1235 and K. 604), and an Inscription of Śivadatta (K. 1150), Previously Considered a Son of Īśānavarman I'. Udaya: Journal of Khmer Studies 14:23–85. http://www.yosothor.org/uploads/images/Udaya/Udaya_pdf/Udaya-Yosothor/No-14-2019/05_Goodall_Udaya%2014_Final.pdf.

21 Sanderson, 'The Śaiva Religion among the Khmers (Part I)', pp. 349–462, esp. 355–7.

22 Some Kshatriya kings did eat meat: Sangam literature discusses kings eating goat. Calukyan King Somesvara II's diet consisted of rump steak, fried pork, tortoise meat and venison. See Elizabeth Collingham, *Curry: A Tale of Cooks and Conquerors* (London, 2010). For more on the diet of the Khmer kings see Sanderson, 'The Śaiva Religion among the Khmers (Part I)', pp. 349–462.

23 Sanderson, 'The Śaiva Religion among the Khmers (Part I)', p. 390 quoting K353 N.

24 *Brill's Encyclopaedia of Hinduism*, Vol. 1, p. 352; Sanderson, 'The Śaiva Religion among the Khmers (Part I)', pp. 391–2 quoting K989 B.

25 See Piya Changmai, Ron Pinhasi, Michael Pietrusewsky, Miriam T. Stark, Rona Michi Ikehara-Quebral, David Reich and Pavel Flegontov, 'Ancient DNA from Protohistoric Period Cambodia Indicates that South Asians Admixed with Local Populations as Early as 1st–3rd Centuriesce', *Scientific Reports* Vol. 12 (2022), https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-022-26799-3#Sec2. The process of religious transmission in such contexts could have taken place within domestic and communal units much as it did in later times with the hybrid Peranakan communities of the Straits of Malacca (for example, the Chitti Melaka or the Indian Peranakans whose Hindu practices had no Brahmin mediators). See also Guy (ed.), *Lost Kingdoms*, pp. 184–5.

26 The earliest evidence seems to be the naming of the Ghat by the Mekong beside Vat Phu as Kurukṣetra in K.367, along with a quotation in the same inscription noticed by Claude Jacques.

27 Wink, *Al-Hind*, Vol. 1, pp. 338–9; O. W. Wolters, 'Khmer "Hinduism" in the Seventh Century', in Craig J. Reynolds (ed.), *Early Southeast Asia: Selected Essays of O. W. Wolters* (Ithaca, NY, 2008), pp. 177–92 at p. 189. Suresh Muthukumaran points out that the inscription also mentions 'the Golden Pandiya', a reference to the Tamil hero 'Pandiya of the Golden Hand', which again emphasises how much early Hindu interaction with South-east Asia took place via Tamil Nadu. See Suresh Muthukumaran, 'The Tamil Diaspora in Pre-Modern Southeast Asia: A Longue Durée Narrative', in Arun Mahizhnan and Nalini Gopal (eds), *Sojourners to Settlers: Tamils in Southeast Asia* (Singapore, 2019), Vol. 1, pp. 26–44 at p. 27.

28 Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men* (Berkeley, 2003), pp. 137–8, 236.

29 Ibid.

30 Guy, 'Introducing Early Southeast Asia', p. 6.

31 It is interesting that the first political inscription in Sanskrit in India, that of Rudradaman from Junagadh, is only a hundred years earlier: this implies very quick transference. See Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men*, pp. 67–73.

32 Frederick Asher, 'India Abroad: Evidence for Ancient Indian Maritime Activity', in Matthew Adam Cobb (ed.), *The Indian Ocean Trade in Antiquity: Political, Cultural and Economic Impacts* (London, 2019), pp. 157–67.

33 Andrew Hardy, Mauro Cucarzi and Patrizia Zolese (eds), *Champa and the Archaeology of My Son (Vietnam)* (Singapore, 2009), p. 141; John Guy, 'Tamil Merchants and the Hindu–Buddhist Diaspora', in Manguin, Mani and Wade (eds), *Early Interactions between South and Southeast Asia*, pp. 243–62 at p. 249.

34 For a good introduction to the development and diffusion of Tamil-Brahmi see K. Rajan, 'Evolution of the Tamil Script: An Essential Beginning', pp. 1–22, and Andrea Acri, 'Hinduism in Pre-Modern Southeast Asia: Tamil Perspectives', pp. 51–63, both in Mahizhnan and Gopal (eds), *Sojourners to Settlers*, Vol. 1.

35 Swati Chemburkar, 'Introduction', *Art of Cambodia: Interactions with India*, *Marg: A Magazine of the Arts* Vol. 67, No. 2 (December 2015–March 2016), pp. 10–19 at pp. 11, 16; Rajan, 'Evolution of the Tamil Script'.

36 Malini Saran and Vinod C. Khanna, *The Ramayana in Indonesia* (New Delhi, 2004), pp. 22–3.

37 Jan Wisseman Christie, 'State Formation in Early Maritime Southeast Asia: A Consideration of the Theories and the Data', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde / Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* Vol. 151, No. 2 (1995), pp. 235–88. See also Maxwell, 'Religion at the Time of Jayavarman VII', pp. 72–122; John Guy, 'Tamil Merchants and the Hindu–Buddhist Diaspora in Early Southeast Asia', p. 247, and Johannes Bronkhorst, 'The Spread of Sanskrit in Southeast Asia', p. 267, both in Manguin, Mani and Wade (eds), *Early Interactions between South and Southeast Asia.*

38 Himanshu Prabha Ray, *The Archaeology of Seafaring in Ancient South Asia* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 150.

39 For the redating of this celebrated inscription to the beginning of the sixth century, see Pierre-Yves Manguin, 'The Transmission of Vaiṣṇavism across the Bay of Bengal: Trade Networks and State Formation in Early Historic Southeast Asia', in Angela Schottenhammer (ed.), *Early Global Interconnectivity across the Indian Ocean World, Vol. II: Exchange of Ideas, Religions, and Technologies* (London, 2019), pp. 51–68 at p. 60.

40 Muthukumaran, 'The Tamil Diaspora in Pre-Modern Southeast Asia', pp. 27, 30, and Acri, 'Hinduism in Pre-Modern Southeast Asia', pp. 63–4. The footprints could also be a reference to Vishnu taking three steps to circumambulate the world.

41 There is a long-running and highly complex debate about the Sanjaya and Sailendra dynasties: were they actually one dynasty or two? Andrea Acri (in 'On Birds, Ascetics, and Kings in Central Java: *Rāmāyaṇa Kakawin*, 24.96–126 and 25', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde / Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* Vol. 166, No. 4 (2010), pp. 475–506) adheres to the dual-dynasty model, whereas several other scholars believe there was a single dynasty. A recent publication by Bronner appears to revive the dual-dynasty model. (Cf. Yigal Bronner, 'The Mirror of the Practice', in Bronner (ed.), *A Lasting Vision*, p. 415 n. 2.) See Roy E. Jordaan and Brian Colless, *The Mahārājas of the Isles: The Śailendras and the Problem of Śrivijaya* (Leiden, 2009), for an expert summary of the long history of debate on the Shailendras.

42 One of the Chalukya Pattadakal temples has several labelled panels showing scenes from the Rāmāyaṇa which date from the seventh century. But these hardly represent a complete cycle of illustration like the Loro Jonggrang sculptures.

43 Sheldon Pollock in *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men*, p. 162, points out that the version of *The Ramayana* sculpted at Prambanan appears to be 'the sixth century science-poem (*sastrakavya*) of Bhatti [which] occupied a position of cultural centrality in Java … and also provided the model for the ninth or tenth century *kakawin* that inaugurates Javanese vernacularization'.

44 Bronner (ed.), *A Lasting Vision*, Introduction, p. 15.

45 Andrea Acri, Helen Creese and Arlo Griffiths (eds), *From Lanka Eastwards: The Ramayana in the Literature and Visual Arts of Indonesia* (Leiden, 2011).

46 Bhattacharya, Kamaleswar, 'La Secte des Pāçupata dans l'ancien Cambodge', *Journal Asiatique* Vol. 243, No. 4 (1955), pp. 480–7; Swati Chemburkar and Shivani Kapoor, 'The Pāśupata Sect in Ancient Cambodia and Champa', in Tran Phy Phuong , Vo Van Thang and Peter D. Sharrock (eds), *Vibrancy in Stone: Masterpieces of the Da Nang Museum of Cham Sculpture* (Bangkok, 2018), pp. 45–56 at pp. 45–6; Sanderson, 'The Śaiva Religion among the Khmers (Part I)', pp. 349–462; Alexis Sanderson, 'The Śaiva Age: The Rise and Dominance of Śaivism in the Early Medieval Period', in Shingo Einoo (ed.), *Genesis and Development of Tantrism* (Tokyo, 2009), pp. 41–349.

47 Diwarka Acharya, 'How to Behave Like a Bull? New Insight into the Origin and Religious Traditions of the Pasupatas', *Indo-Iranian Journal* Vol. 56, No. 2 (2013), pp. 101–31, esp. p. 102.

48 According to Diwakar Acharya (in ibid.), Pashupatas orginated in Vedic ritual milieu focusing on the imitative observance of the bull rooted in the cult of Indra. See also Minoru Hara, *Pāśupata Studies*, ed. Jun Takashima (Vienna, 2002).

49 Acharya, 'How to Behave Like a Bull?', pp. 104, 109.

50 The Pashupatas defended the view that they became identical to Shiva at death, either because his properties were transferred into them, or because those properties arose spontaneously within them, or because they became 'possessed' by those divine properties. Merely reaching another world, even Śivaloka, they considered to be a lowlier destiny, a half-way house from which recidivism was possible. See Watson, Alex, Dominic Goodall and S.L.P. Anjaneya Sarma, '*An Enquiry into the Nature of Liberation. Bhaṭṭa Rāmakaṇṭha's Paramokṣanirāsakārikāvṛtti, a commentary on Sadyojyotiḥ's refutation of twenty conceptions of the liberated state (mokṣa)*'. Collection Indologie, 122, Institut Français de Pondichéry (Pondichéry, 2013).

51 Pasu also means 'bound souls'. The pun here is evident.

52 Pia Brancaccio, *The Buddhist Caves at Aurangabad: Transformations in Art and Religion* (Leiden, 2011), pp. 153–5; Hans T. Bakker, *The World of the Skandapurana: Northern India in the Sixth and Seventh Centuries* (Leiden, 2014), pp. 8–14, 148–53; Guy, 'Shiva's Land', pp. 253–74; Swati Chemburkar, 'Dancers, Musicians, Ascetics, and Priests: Performance-Based Śaiva Worship and its Development in the Temple Culture of Angkor', in Andrea Acri and Peter Sharrock (eds), *Creative South: Buddhist and Hindu Art in Medieval Maritime Asia* (Singapore, 2022), Vol. 1, pp. 192–221.

53 Goodall, Dominic, 'Nandirāśi's Pāśupata Monastery: K. 1352 (590 Śaka), a Non-Royal Sanskrit Inscription in Kampot from the Reign of Jayavarman I'. In *Liber Amicorum. Mélanges Réunis En Hommage à Ang Chouléan*, Grégory Mikaelian, Ashley Thompson, and Sophearith Siyonn (eds), Paris: Association Péninsule & Association des Amis de Yosothor (Paris, 2020), p. 325–43.

54 O. W. Wolters, 'Restudying Some Chinese Writings on Sriwijaya', in Reynolds (ed.), *Early Southeast Asia*, pp. 109–48 at pp. 110–12.

55 Ibid. Pashupatas or rather Shaiva officiants among them, offered Shaiva initiation-*diksha* to the monarch followed by a specifically modified version of the Shaiva consecration ritual (*abhiseka*) as an empowerment to rule beyond that conferred by the conventional Brahmanical royal consecration (*rajyabhiseka*). They also offered protective, therapeutic and aggressive rites for the benefit of the monarch and kingdom. They kind of took over the position of Rajapurohita, a Brahmanical expert in the rites of Atharvaveda who served as the personal priest of the king. See Sanderson, 'The Śaiva Religion among the Khmers (Part I)', pp. 349–462.

56 Goodall, Dominic, and Nicolas Revire, 'East and West – New Inscriptions from Funan, Zhenla and Dvāravatī'. In *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient*, 107 (2021): pp. 257–301.

57 Wolters, 'Restudying Some Chinese Writings on Sriwijaya', pp. 110–12.

58 While Hiranyadama was definitely Shaiva, it is not known if he was a Pashupata or not. Hiraṇyadāman may rather have been connected to Śaivas of the Mantramārga. The scriptures mentioned in connection with him are tantric works of part of the canon of the so-called Vāmasrotas of the Mantramārga. The Śaiva Mantramārga seems to have progressively supplanted the Atimārga in Angkor-period Cambodia, but there are still some Pāśupata names (in -rāśi) that crop up in inscriptions of the Angkorian period.

59 Wolters, 'Khmer "Hinduism" in the Seventh Century', pp. 177–92.

60 Swati Chemburkar, 'Dancing Architecture at Angkor: "Halls with Dancers" in Jayavarman VII's Temples', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* Vol. 46, No. 3 (October 2015), pp. 514–36; Victor Goloubew, 'Sur l'origine et la diffusion des tambours métalliques', *Praehistorica Asiae Orientalis* Vol. 1 (1932), pp. 137–44; this interpretation was supported by A. J. Bernet Kempers, 'The Kettledrums of Southeast Asia: A Bronze Age World and its Aftermath', *Modern Quaternary Research in Southeast Asia*

Vol. 10 (1988), pp. 1–59; see also Helmut Loofs-Wissowa, 'Dongson Drums: Instruments of Shamanism or Regalia? A New Interpretation of their Decoration May Provide the Answer', *Arts Asiatiques* Vol. 46 (1991), pp. 39–49.

61 At Preah Khan Kompong Svay.

62 Kenneth R. Hall, *Maritime Trade and State Development in Early Southeast Asia* (Honolulu, 1985), pp. 138–9.

63 Claude Jacques, *Angkor* (Cologne, 1999), pp. 44–5; Nidhi Aeusrivongse, 'The Devarāja Cult and Khmer Kingship at Angkor', in K. R. Hall and John K. Whitmore, *Explorations in Southeast Asian History: The Origins of Southeast Asian Statecraft* (Ann Arbor, 1976), pp. 107–48; Coe and Evans, *Angkor and the Khmer Civilization*, pp. 120–1.

64 Wolters, 'Khmer "Hinduism" in the Seventh Century', pp. 177–92; Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c.800–1830*, Vol. 1: *Integration on the Mainland* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 231.

65 Sanderson, 'The Śaiva Religion among the Khmers (Part I)', p. 403.

66 Coe and Evans, *Angkor and the Khmer Civilization*, pp. 120–1.

67 Sanderson, 'The Śaiva Religion among the Khmers (Part I)', p. 356.

68 Hall, *Maritime Trade and State Development in Early Southeast Asia*, pp. 137, 160–1, says that the temples of Angkor were part of the royal system of extending the cultivation and colonising new lands, and 'centres for the collection of economic resources'.

69 Jayavarman II first conquered Vyadhapura (south-east Cambodia), then Sambhupura (present-day Sambor), then Wat Phu in the north, before establishing his power at Ananditapura and settling at Hariharalya. Preah Ko and Bakong are Indravarman I's work. While the religious basis of Angkor monarchy is usually attributed to Jayavarman II, some scholars have argued that it was under his second successor, Indravarman (877–89), that the great religious foundations typical of the centralised Angkor state really began to appear. It is interesting that Indravarman's chief Brahmin, Sivasoma, claimed to have studied under 'Bhagavan Sankara whose lotus feet are lapped by the [bee-like] heads of all scholars', apparently a reference to the great Hindu revivalist Adi Sankara. Muthukumaran, 'The Tamil Diaspora in Pre-Modern Southeast Asia', p. 34.

70 Miriam T. Stark, 'Pre-Angkorian and Angkorian Cambodia', in Glover and Bellwood (eds), *Southeast Asia*, pp. 89–119, esp. p. 107; Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, Vol. 1, p. 229.

71 Charles Higham, *The Archaeology of Mainland Southeast Asia* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 348–52.

72 Bernard P. Groslier, 'La Cité hydraulique angkorienne', *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* Vol. 66 (1979), pp. 161–202 at pp. 190–4.

73 Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, Vol. 1, p. 219; Robert Acker, 'New Geographical Tests of the Hydraulic Thesis at Angkor', *South East Asia Research* Vol. 6, No. 1 (1998), pp. 18, 37–8.

74 Hall, *Maritime Trade and State Development in Early Southeast Asia*, p. 141; *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, Vol. 1, p. 348. Evidence about Jayavarman III, indicates that the posthumous renaming of kings with apparently divine titles was not always conceived of as a divinisation. Mostly these divine titles appear in the Khmer portions of the inscriptions, where the syntax is scant. But in the case of Jayavarman III, several instances of his posthumous name 'Viṣṇu-loka' appear in Sanskrit contexts, where heavy and obligatory inflections create greater clarity, and there they appear in such formulations as viṣṇulokasthita, 'he who stands in the world of Viṣṇu', and viṣṇulokaprayāta, 'he who has gone to Viṣṇu's world'. In other words, Jayavarman III is not exactly divinised, he has just reached Viṣṇu's heaven (p. 274 of Goodall, Hun, Acharya, Chhom, Chollet, Mirnig 2021). We can therefore infer that Yaśovarman (paramaśivapada) has simply gone to 'the place (pada) of Parama Śiva' and that Jayavarman IV(paramaśivaloka) is '[gone to] the world (loka) of Supreme Śiva'. At some point the use of such names blurs into divinisation simply because most Śaiva notions of ultimate liberation involve either becoming identical to Śiva or merging into Śiva.

75 Yajnavaraha was assisted by his younger brother Visnukumara.

76 Coe and Evans, *Angkor and the Khmer Civilization*, pp. 134–5.

77 Jessup and Zephir (eds), *Sculpture of Angkor and Ancient Cambodia*, pp. 123–8.

78 K. 842 quoted in Goodall, 'What Information Can Be Gleaned from Cambodian Inscriptions about Practices Relating to the Transmission of Sanskrit Literature?', p. 137.

79 Ibid., p. 157; Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men*, pp. 126–7, 162–3.

80 Muthukumaran, 'The Tamil Diaspora in Pre-Modern Southeast Asia', p. 27.

81 Acri, ‘Hinduism in Pre-Modern Southeast Asia’, p. 66. This attribution is not uncontested. Recent work by Éric Bourdonneau has cast some doubt on this identification, interpreting it instead as a depiction of the angry form of the goddess (Dominic Goodall agrees with this). The interpretations still seems open: the motif of Kraikkal could have been introduced at a later date, and looks similar to previous depictions of the scene of Shiva with the goddess. See Éric Bourdonneau, ‘La Fondation du culte du *Devarāja*: danse, sacrifice et royauté au Prasat Thom de Koh Ker’, *Comptes rendus de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* Vol. 155, No. 3 (2011), pp. 1,343–82 at p. 1,378.

82 Muthukumaran, ‘The Tamil Diaspora in Pre-Modern Southeast Asia’, p. 34. Although various people have speculated that the Śaṅkara under whom Indravarman’s rājaguru Śivasoma studied may have been Ādi Śaṅkarācārya (verse 39 of K. 809), the idea is improbable, and there seems to me to be little evidence at all to support it. Śaṅkara is an extremely common name (and name-element) because it is a name of Śiva. There is no mention of India in the inscription, and no echo of reflection of Śaṅkara’s Vedāntic philosophy. (There is, incidentally, barely any echo of Śaṅkara’s philosophy in the entire Khmer corpus.).

83 Vasudha Narayanan, ‘Who is the Strong-Armed Monkey Who Churns the Ocean of Milk?’, *UDAYA: Journal of Khmer Studies* Vol. 11 (February 2014), pp. 3–28.

84 Label eight of the inscription on the south wall of the *prakara*.

85 Muthukumaran, ‘The Tamil Diaspora in Pre-Modern Southeast Asia’, pp. 33–4. The most persuasive champions of a Cambodian childhood for Nandivarman II are D. Dennis Hudson, *The Body of God: An Emperor’s Palace for Krishna in Eighth-Century Kanchipuram* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 56–8, 72–3, and Sanjeev Sanyal, *The Ocean of Churn: How the Indian Ocean Shaped Human History* (New Delhi, 2016), pp. 6–9. Hudson credits the idea to the Tamil historian T. V. Mahalingam in his *Kañcīpuram in Early South Indian History* (Bombay, 1969), pp. 137–85. Noboru Karashima also entertains the idea in his *Concise History of South India*, pp. 87–8. Others are, however, sceptical. Hudson himself records that ‘Hiram W. Woodward, Jr., in a personal communication, kindly alerted me to what may be the “sandcastle” nature of the following argument. Nevertheless, because of the documented liturgical connections between the Pallava realm and Cambodia in these centuries, I think it worth making.’ In private correspondence, four leading authorities, Vidya Dehejia, Vasudha Narayanan, Swati Chemburkar and Himanshu Prabha Rai all told me that they thought there was insufficient evidence to regard the idea as more than interesting speculation; but it certainly is that.

86 Richard M. Eaton, *India in the Persianate Age: 1000–1765* (London, 2019), p. 27.

87 Hermann Kulke, ‘The Naval Expeditions of the Cholas in the Context of Asian History’, in Hermann Kulke, K. Kesavapany and Vijay Sakhuja (eds), *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadvipa: Reflections on the Cholas Naval Expeditions to Southeast Asia* (Singapore, 2009), pp. 1–19 at pp. 7–10.

88 Kenneth R. Hall, ‘Khmer Commercial Development and Foreign Contacts under Sūryavarman I’, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* Vol. 18, No. 3 (1975), pp. 318–36 at p. 334; Y. Subbarayalu, *South India under the Cholas* (New Delhi, 2012), pp. 38–48; Miksic and Goh, *Ancient Southeast Asia*, p. 397.

89 Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade: The Realignment of India–China Relations, 600–1400* (London, 2016), p. 232.

90 Tansen Sen, ‘The Military Campaigns of Rajendra Chola, and the Chola–Srivijaya–China Triangle’, in Kulke, Kesavapany and Sakhuja (eds), *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadvipa*, pp. 61–75 at p. 63.

91 *Cūḷavaṃsa: Being the More Recent Part of the Mahāvaṃsa*, trans. Wilhelm Geiger and Mabel C. Rickmers (New Delhi, 1992), p. 186; Archaeological Survey of India, *Epigraphia Indica*, XVI, 75 (New Delhi, 1921–2); K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, *The Cholas* (Madras, 1955), p. 176; Paul Michel Munoz, *Early Kingdoms: Indonesian Archipelago and the Malay Peninsula* (Singapore, 2006), p. 159; Anirudh Kanisetti, *Lords of the Deccan: Southern India from the Chalukyas to the Cholas* (New Delhi, 2022), pp. 265, 275.

92 Eaton, *India in the Persianate Age*, pp. 19–27.

93 Miksic and Goh, *Ancient Southeast Asia*, p. 397.

94 Munoz, *Early Kingdoms*, pp. 158–9.

95 Vidya Dehejia, *The Thief Who Stole my Heart* (New York, 2020), pp. 194–5; Meera Abraham, *Two Medieval Merchant Guilds of South India* (Old Delhi, 1988), pp. 140ff.

96 Dehejia, *The Thief Who Stole my Heart*, pp. 194–5; Kulke, ‘The Naval Expeditions of the Cholas in the Context of Asian History’, p. 1; Vijay Sakhuja and Sangeeta Sakhuja, ‘Rajendra Chola I’s Naval Expedition to Southeast Asia: A Nautical Perspective’, in Kulke, Kesavapany and Sakhuja (eds),

Nagapattinam to Suvarnadvipa, pp. 77–8.

97 Sakhuja and Sakhuja, 'Rajendra Chola I's Naval Expedition to Southeast Asia', pp. 78–9.

98 One reading of the boulder is *Parakesarivarman* – Great Lion. See Iain Sinclair, 'Traces of the Cholas in Old Singapore', in Mahizhnan and Gopal (eds), *Sojourners to Settlers*, Vol. 1, pp. 45–58.

99 Miksic and Goh, *Ancient Southeast Asia*, p. 397.

100 Muthukumaran, 'The Tamil Diaspora in Pre-Modern Southeast Asia', p. 41.

101 Ibid., pp. 35–9; John Miksic, 'Tamil Influence on Buddhism in Southeast Asia', in Mahizhnan and Gopal (eds), *Sojourners to Settlers*, Vol. 1, p. 77, and Sunil Amrith, 'Presence as Palimpsest: Tamil Diasporas in Southeast Asia', in Mahizhnan and Gopal (eds), *Sojourners to Settlers*, Vol. 1, p. 27; Miksic and Goh, *Ancient Southeast Asia*, pp. 398–9.

102 Sunil S. Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants* (Cambridge, Mass., 2013), pp. 16–17; Kulke, 'The Naval Expeditions of the Cholas in the Context of Asian History', p. 9.

103 Hall, 'Khmer Commercial Development and Foreign Contacts under Sūryavarman I'.

104 Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade*, pp. 229–34; Sen, 'The Military Campaigns of Rajendra Chola, and the Chola–Srivijaya–China Triangle', p. 62.

105 Sen, 'The Military Campaigns of Rajendra Chola, and the Chola–Srivijaya–China Triangle', p. 63; Risha Lee, 'Rethinking Community: The Indic Carvings of Quanzhou', in Kulke, Kesavapany and Sakhuja (eds), *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadvipa*, pp. 240–70.

106 Guy, 'Tamil Merchants and the Hindu–Buddhist Diaspora', pp. 253–9; John Guy, 'The Lost Temples of Nagapattinam and Quanzhou: A Study in Sino-Indian Relations', *Silk Road Archaeology* Vol. 3 (1994), pp. 291–310; Muthukumaran, 'The Tamil Diaspora in Pre-Modern Southeast Asia', pp. 39–40.

107 Noboru Karashima, 'South Indian Merchant Guilds in the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia', in Kulke, Kesavapany and Sakhuja (eds), *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadvipa*, pp. 135–57; Miksic and Goh, *Ancient Southeast Asia*, p. 399; E. Edwards McKinnon, 'Continuity and Change in South Indian Involvement in Northern Sumatra: The Inferences of Archaeological Evidence from Kota Cina and Lamreh', in Manguin, Mani and Wade (eds), *Early Interactions between South and Southeast Asia*, pp. 137–60.

108 Miksic and Goh, *Ancient Southeast Asia*, pp. 399–401; Munoz, *Early Kingdoms*, p. 160.

109 Charles Higham, *The Civilization of Angkor* (London, 2001), pp. 114–16.

110 Mannikka, *Angkor Wat*, p. 22.

111 Suryavarman II was not of course the first Khmer to be a devotee of Vishnu: Jayavarman II's successor, Jayavarman III, strongest passion seems to have been for Viṣhṇu. Again, the evidence is from a posthumous inscription (practically all inscriptions about Jayavarman III are posthumous), but probably by less than a century in this case. See Goodall, Dominic, Chhunteng Hun, Diwakar Acharya, Kunthea Chhom, Chloé Chollet, and Nina Mirnig, 'Sectarian Rivalry in Ninth-Century Cambodia: A Posthumous Inscription Narrating the Religious Tergiversations of Jayavarman III (K. 1457)'. In *Medieval Worlds*, Vol. 13. (2021), pp. 266–95. Online at: https://doi.org/10.1553/medievalworlds_no13_2021s266.

112 George Coedès, *Pour mieux comprendre Angkor* (Paris, 1947); Charles Higham, *The Civilization of Angkor*, p. 118.

113 Mannikka, *Angkor Wat*; Coe and Evans, *Angkor and the Khmer Civilization*, p. 147.

114 Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men*, pp. 234–5.

115 Helen Ibbitson Jessup, *Art and Architecture of Cambodia* (London, 2004), pp. 149–50; O. W. Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Ithaca, NY, 1999), p. 63; Mannikka, *Angkor Wat.*

9: The Treasury of the Books of Wisdom

1 Much of this chapter derives from the brilliant detective work of Kevin van Bladel, who found the missing link between the intellectual world of India and the Arabs in the Barmakids. See Kevin van Bladel, 'The Bactrian Background of the Barmakids', in Anna Akasoy, Charles Burnett and Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim (eds), *Islam and Tibet: Interactions on the Musk Routes* (Farnham, 2011), pp. 43–88 at p. 83. See also Jonathan Lyons, *The House of Wisdom: How the Arabs Transformed Western Civilisation* (London, 2009), pp. 62, 70; George Gheverghese Joseph, *The Crest of the Peacock: Non-European Roots of*

Mathematics (Princeton, 2011), pp. 462–3. Some later accounts, some from as far away as twelfth-century Spain, have Kanika (or alternatively Ganaka) 'the Indian' alone coming on the embassy which brought the *Sindhind*, and in time he grew to be a much praised symbol or even the personification of Indian influence on Arab astronomy, and occasionally of Indian medicine too. See David Pingree, *From Astral Omens to Astrology: From Babylon to Bīkāner* (Rome, 1997), pp. 51–3; Joseph, *The Crest of the Peacock*, pp. 456–7; Kim Plofker, *Mathematics in India* (Princeton, 2009), p. 256.

2 The *Sindhind* seems to have contained portions of Brahmagupta's work known in Sanskrit as the *Siddhanta*. According to David Pingree's entry on the subject in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam New Edition Online (EI-2 English)*, which brings together many of his extensive writings on the subject, 'the word *Sindhind* was understood by Arabic authors to mean "eternal" in Sanskrit, because its astronomical system is based on a *kalpa* of 4,320,000,000 years, but it is in fact a clever calque (Sind and Hind) on *Siddhatha*, or *Mahasiddhanta*. The original *Siddhanta* was either a part (*adhyaya* I–X) of the *Brahmasphutasiddhanta*, composed by Brahmagupta at Bhillamala in Southern Rajasthan in ad 628 for the Capa ruler Vyaghramukha (Fiyagraha in Arabic), or a separate treatise, the hypothetical *Mahasiddhanta*, derivative from it, but mixing it with elements of other Sanskrit astronomical works. The Arabic translation is known only through its remote descendants, each of which has distorted its immediate ancestor in various ways.' In a separate essay, Pingree notes that the *Mahasiddhanta* later became known as the *Brahmapaksha*. David Pingree, 'The Fragments of the Works of Al-Fazārī', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* Vol. 29, No. 2 (April 1970), pp. 103–23. For the *Siddhanta* being known as The Opening of the Universe see Violet Moller, *The Map of Knowledge: A Thousand-Year History of How Classical Ideas Were Lost and Found* (London, 2019), p. 69. George Gheverghese Joseph, *Indian Mathematics: Engaging with the World from Ancient to Modern Times* (London, 2016), pp. 199–231; F. W. Kokomoor, 'The Status of Mathematics in India and Arabia during the "Dark Ages of Europe" ', in Frank J. Swetz (ed.), *From Five Fingers to Infinity: A Journey through the History of Mathematics* (Chicago, 1994), pp. 267–74.

3 D. Lehoux, 'The Parapegma Fragments from Miletus', *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* Vol. 152 (2005), pp. 125–40, cited in Sureshkumar Muthukumaran, *The Tropical Turn: Agricultural Innovation in the Ancient Middle East and the Mediterranean* (Oakland, 2023), p. 391. David Pingree notes that Kallaneus was employing a Greek rather than an Indian method of prediction, given that lunar conjunctions with fixed stars were used as indicators of meteorological phenomena in India, in contrast to the heliacal movements cited in the Milesian parapegmata. David Pingree, 'The Indian and Pseudo-Indian Passages in Greek and Latin Astronomical and Astrological Texts', *Viator* Vol. 7 (1976), pp. 141–95.

4 Plofker, *Mathematics in India*, p. 255; Joseph, *The Crest of the Peacock*, p. 462.

5 Moller, *The Map of Knowledge*, p. 69.

6 Ibn al-Qifti quoted in Pingree, 'The Fragments of the Works of Al-Fazārī', pp. 103–23; van Bladel, 'The Bactrian Background of the Barmakids', p. 83.

7 Pingree, 'The Fragments of the Works of Al-Fazārī', pp. 103–23.

8 Van Bladel, 'The Bactrian Background of the Barmakids'.

9 This information is derived from the surviving fragments of Abu Hafs al-Kirmani's history of the Barmakids, the *Akhbar al-Baramika*, as reconstructed by Kevin van Bladel in 'The Bactrian Background of the Barmakids', pp. 60–4. Christopher I. Beckwith also quotes the decriptions in the *Hudud al-Alam*. See Christopher I. Beckwith, 'The Plan of the City of Peace: Central Asian Iranian Factors in Early ʿAbbâsid Design', *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* Vol. 38, No. 1/2 (1984), pp. 143–64 at p. 150. The ninth-century Persian geographer Ibn al-Faqih goes so far as to compare the Barmakids' role to the pre-Islamic role of the Quraysh clan as guardians of the Kaʻba. See Ibn al-Faqīh al-Hamadhānī, *Kitāb al-Buldān* (Leiden, 1967), pp. 323–24. Richard W. Bulliet, 'Naw Bahār and the Survival of Iranian Buddhism', *Iran* Vol. 14 (1976), pp. 140–5. See also Hugh Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World: The Rise and Fall of Islam's Greatest Dynasty* (London, 2005), pp. 38–9.

10 Van Bladel, 'The Bactrian Background of the Barmakids', p. 66. Van Bladel is again drawing on the surviving fragments of Abu Hafs al-Kirmani's history of the Barmakids, the *Akhbar al-Baramika*.

11 Van Bladel, 'The Bactrian Background of the Barmakids', p. 66.

12 Beckwith, 'The Plan of the City of Peace', pp. 143–64.

13 Moller, *The Map of Knowledge*, p. 61. Peter Frankopan is among the scholars who are dubious about the ideas of Chinese prisoners of war manning the Barmakids' paper mills. Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (London, 2015), p. 98.

14 Van Bladel, 'The Bactrian Background of the Barmakids', p. 74. Aban al-Lahiqi, the poet of the Barmakids, is supposed to have composed a poem about the story of Mazdak.

15 Pingree's entry on the *Sindhind* in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam New Edition Online (EI-2 English)*.

16 Ibid. See also van Bladel, 'The Bactrian Background of the Barmakids', pp. 43–88; Kevin van Bladel, 'Eighth-Century Indian Astronomy in the Two Cities of Peace', in Behnam Sadeghi et al. (eds), *Islamic Cultures, Islamic Contexts: Essays in Honour of Professor Patricia Crone* (Leiden, 2014), pp. 257–94.

17 Joseph, *The Crest of the Peacock*, p. 323.

18 Plofker, *Mathematics in India*, p. vii.

19 For a series of excellent essays on the Gupta civilisation see Bardwell L. Smith, *Essays on Gupta Culture* (Delhi, 1983). Also Pratapaditya Pal, *The Ideal Image: The Gupta Sculptural Tradition and its Influence* (New York, 1978).

20 There are caves dedicated to Shiva too.

21 Michael Willis, *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual: Temples and the Establishment of the Gods* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 10–78, esp. 18–30, 75. The Tropic of Cancer migrates several yards each year.

22 Ibid., pp. 18–21, 75.

23 Sunil Khilnani, *Incarnations: India in 50 Lives* (London, 2016), p. 71. This set of ideas is in origin Aristotelian and was further developed by Ptolemy, and many scholars think it is likely to have been Greek influence that first brought this set of ideas to India.

24 Moller, *The Map of Knowledge*, p. 51.

25 Willis, *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual.*

26 Amir D. Aczel, *Finding Zero: A Mathematician's Odyssey to Uncover the Origins of Numbers* (New York, 2016), p. 1.

27 Ibid., pp. 26–7.

28 Ibid., ch. 8.

29 Joseph, *The Crest of the Peacock*, p. 345.

30 Charles Seife, *Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea* (London, 2000).

31 Plofker, *Mathematics in India*, p. 317; Khilnani, *Incarnations*, pp. 66–7.

32 Khilnani, *Incarnations*, p. 71; Joseph, *The Crest of the Peacock*, pp. 372–5.

33 Joseph, *The Crest of the Peacock*, pp. 346, 375–7.

34 Seife*, Zero*, pp. 66–71; Plofker, *Mathematics in India*, pp. 76–82, 319; Van Bladel, 'Eighth-Century Indian Astronomy in the Two Cities of Peace', pp. 255–6.

35 Some probably erroneous carbon 14 dates commissioned by the Bodleian Library put the manuscript as early as 200 ce, but that date has been strongly resisted by most serious scholars of the manuscript who say that the palaeography and quasi-codex form date it firmly from c.650 to 900 ce, an estimation supported by the new and more comprehensive set of carbon dates. Kim Plofker, Agathe Keller, Takao Hayashi, Clemency Montelle and Dominik Wujastyk, 'The Bakhshālī Manuscript: A Response to the Bodleian Library's Radiocarbon Dating', *History of Science in South Asia* Vol. 5, No. 1 (2017), pp. 134–50.

36 Joseph, *The Crest of the Peacock*, pp. 366–8.

37 The manuscript shows many similarities to the 629 ce commentary on the Aryabhatiya by the seventh-century mathematician Bhaskara, a further confirmation of its date to around 700 ce.

38 Khilnani, *Incarnations*, pp. 66–75.

39 Van Bladel, 'Eighth-Century Indian Astronomy in the Two Cities of Peace', pp. 265, 278–9, 287–8. On this ritual see Stephen Bokenkamp, 'Record of the Feng and Shan Sacrifices', in Donald S. Lopez Jr (ed.), *Religions of China in Practice* (Princeton, 1996), pp. 251–60.

40 Goodall, Dominic, and Nicolas Revire, 'East and West – New Inscriptions from Funan, Zhenla and Dvāravatī ''. In *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient*, 107 (2021), pp. 257–301.

41 Van Bladel, 'The Bactrian Background of the Barmakids', p. 64.

42 The Barmakids subsequently had Naw Bahar rebuilt, and the damage you see today was largely inflicted by the Mongols. See Christopher I. Beckwith, *Warriors of the Cloisters: The Central Asian Origins of Science in the Medieval World* (Princeton, 2012), pp. 79–81. Also Kevin van Bladel's entry on the Barmakids in the *Encyclopedia of Islam, Three.*

43 André Clot, *Harun al-Rashid and the World of the One Thousand and One Nights*, trans. John Howe (London, 2005), p. 35. Van Bladel, 'The Bactrian Background of the Barmakids', pp. 72–3; see also van

Bladel's entry on the Barmakids in the *Encyclopedia of Islam, Three*.

44 Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World*, p. 10.

45 Beckwith, *Warriors of the Cloisters*, p. 80.

46 Van Bladel, 'The Bactrian Background of the Barmakids', p. 73.

47 Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World*, pp. 38–9.

48 Al-Tabarī, *The Early 'Abbāsī Empire*, Vol. 1: *The Reign of Abū Ja'far al-Mansūr, a.d. 754–775*, trans. John Alden Williams (Cambridge, 1988), p. 143; Beckwith, 'The Plan of the City of Peace', p. 144.

49 The circular plan may well have originated in India with the idea of the city as a *mandala*, a concept that then spread into Central Asia with Buddhism.

50 S. Frederick Starr, *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane* (Princeton, 2013), pp. 126–31; Moller, *The Map of Knowledge*, p. 59.

51 Frankopan, *The Silk Roads*, p. 96.

52 M. Shefer-Mossensohn and K. Abou Hershkovitz, 'Early Muslim Medicine and the Indian Context: A Reinterpretation', in *Medieval Encounters* Vol. 19 (2013), pp. 274–99 at pp. 274–9; Frankopan, *The Silk Roads*, p. 97; Moller, *The Map of Knowledge*, p. 73.

53 Clot, *Harun al-Rashid and the World of the One Thousand and One Nights*, p. 25.

54 Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World*, pp. 249–52.

55 Ibn Khaldûn, *The Muqaddimah*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton, 1967), Vol. 3, pp. 115, 130; Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbasid Society (2nd–4th/8th–10th Centuries)* (Oxford, 1998), p. 32.

56 Richard Fletcher, *The Cross and the Crescent: Christianity and Islam from Muhammad to the Reformation* (London, 2003), p. 38; Moller, *The Map of Knowledge*, p. 68.

57 Lyons, *The House of Wisdom*, p. 97; van Bladel, 'The Bactrian Background of the Barmakids', p. 83; Starr, *Lost Enlightenment*, p. 137.

58 Fletcher, *The Cross and the Crescent*, p. 38; Beckwith, *Warriors of the Cloisters*, p. 85.

59 Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World*, p. 249.

60 Aydın Sayılı, *The Observatory in Islam* (Ankara, 1960), p. 53; Moller, *The Map of Knowledge*, p. 65; Lyons, *The House of Wisdom*, p. 97. Hugh Kennedy warns that the sources on the House of Wisdom are fragmentary and that 'there is very little hard information about the institution'. Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World*, p. 246.

61 Moller, *The Map of Knowledge*, p. 68.

62 Lyons, *The House of Wisdom*, pp. 61–3.

63 Frankopan, *The Silk Roads*, p. 98; Moller, *The Map of Knowledge*, p. 65.

64 Shefer-Mossensohn and Hershkovitz, 'Early Muslim Medicine and the Indian Context', p. 294.

65 Van Bladel, 'Eighth-Century Indian Astronomy in the Two Cities of Peace', pp. 255–6.

66 Shefer-Mossensohn and Hershkovitz, 'Early Muslim Medicine and the Indian Context', p. 287.

67 Ibid., p. 288; van Bladel, 'The Bactrian Background of the Barmakids', p. 76; Christopher I. Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present* (Princeton, 2009), p. 153.

68 He is referred to in the sources by the Arabic name 'Ibn Dahn al-Hindi'.

69 'Manka the Indian' may or may not be the same man elsewhere called Kanika (or Ganika) al-Hindi.

70 Johan Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road* (Philadelphia, 2010), pp. 60–1. Many of these texts ended up in Sahl at-Tabari's medical compendium, *Paradise of Wisdom*. Shefer-Mossensohn and Hershkovitz, 'Early Muslim Medicine and the Indian Context', p. 288. Van Bladel, 'The Bactrian Background of the Barmakids', pp. 76–7, gives the names of the other Kashmir texts as the *Suśruta Saṃhitā* and the *Siddhasāra*. Kevin van Bladel notes how one text gives some brief details of the methods by which these Sanskrit texts were translated: 'Manka al-Hindi interpreted it from the Indian language into the Persian language. A man known as Abu Hatim of Balkh was the one charged with translating it into the Persian script. He interpreted it for Yahya ibn Khalid ibn Barmak. Then it was translated for al-Ma'mun by al-'Abbas ibn Said al-Jawhari who was charged with reading it out loud to al-Mamun.' He gives fascinating details to explain how this passage survived: 'A few decades later, the famous physician al-Razi became master of a hospital at Baghdad – perhaps the same hospital attributed earlier to the Barmakids. His great medical compendium, *al-Hawi*, is based largely on the then-predominant Galenic medicine as well as his own research, but it also includes a number of excerpts from the Arabic translations of Sanskrit works, including fragments of the *Siddhasāra* and the

Atangahrdaya. Much later, in early thirteenth-century Andalusia, Ibn al-Baytar copied some of the same citations from the *Hawi* into his encyclopaedia of simple drugs. In these two works we find fragments of the early Arabic translations of Sanskrit works.' Van Bladel, 'The Bactrian Background of the Barmakids', pp. 77–8. See also Beckwith, *Warriors of the Cloisters*, pp. 82–3.

71 Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam*, pp. 59–82.

72 Al-Nadim, *Kitab al-fihrist*, quoted in van Bladel, 'The Bactrian Background of the Barmakids', p. 75.

73 Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam*, p. 61; van Bladel, 'The Bactrian Background of the Barmakids', p. 81.

74 Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam*, p. 73. At the same time we find in popular Islam the appearance of 'magic squares' and amulets used for divination, both of which seem to have a Buddhist origin. See ibid., pp. 104–14.

75 Stephen Hillyer Levitt, 'Chess: Its South Asian Origin and Meaning', *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* Vol. 72–3, No. 1–4 (1991–2), pp. 533–47; Hans T. Bakker, *The World of the Skandapurana: Northern India in the Sixth and Seventh Centuries* (Leiden, 2014), pp. 64–5; Richard Eales, *Chess: The History of a Game* (New York, 2019), p. 31.

76 Masudi, *The Meadows of Gold: The Abbasids*, ed. and trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone (Oxford, 1989), p. 115; Clot, *Harun al-Rashid and the World of the One Thousand and One Nights*, p. 36.

77 Starr, *Lost Enlightenment*, p. 132.

78 Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World*, p. 63.

79 Starr, *Lost Enlightenment*, p. 133.

80 Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World*, p. 73.

81 Masudi, *The Meadows of Gold*, pp. 115–17.

82 Starr, *Lost Enlightenment*, p. 139; Clot, *Harun al-Rashid and the World of the One Thousand and One Nights*, pp. 85–6.

83 Masudi, *The Meadows of Gold*, pp. 118–19.

84 Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World*, pp. 72–3.

85 Masudi, *The Meadows of Gold*, pp. 118–20.

86 Clot, *Harun al-Rashid and the World of the One Thousand and One Nights*, pp. 85–6; Starr, *Lost Enlightenment*, p. 139.

87 Masudi, *The Meadows of Gold*, p. 123.

88 Roshdi Rashed, *The Development of Arabic Mathematics: Between Arithmetic and Algebra* (Dordrecht, 1994), pp. 8–22; Starr, *Lost Enlightenment*, p. 74.

89 Joseph, *The Crest of the Peacock*, pp. 455–7.

90 Lyons, *The House of Wisdom*, pp. 71–3; Moller, *The Map of Knowledge*, p. 71.

91 Lyons, *The House of Wisdom*, p. 73.

92 Ṣāʿid al-Andalusī, *Science in the Medieval World: 'The Book of the Categories of Nations'* (Austin, 1991), Chapter 5.

10: Fruits of the Science of Numbers

1 Bernard F. Reilly, *The Contest of Christian and Muslim Spain, 1031–1157* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 80–6; Charles Burnett, 'The Coherence of the Arabic–Latin Translation Program in Toledo in the Twelfth Century', in Charles Burnett, *Arabic into Latin in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 249–88; Simon Barton and Richard Fletcher, *The World of El Cid: Chronicles of the Spanish Reconquest* (Manchester, 1988), pp. 4, 108–9. Richard Fletcher, *The Quest for El Cid* (New York, 1990), pp. 125–151.

2 Richard Fletcher, *Moorish Spain* (London, 1992); Brian A. Catlos, *Kingdoms of Faith: A New History of Islamic Spain* (New York, 2018), pp. 231–3.

3 Catlos, *Kingdoms of Faith*, pp. 232–3.

4 Marco Zuccato, 'Arabic Singing Girls, the Pope, and the Astrolabe: Arabic Science in Tenth Century Europe', *Viator* Vol. 45, No. 1 (2014), pp. 99–120.

5 Charles Burnett, 'King Ptolemy and Alchandreus the Philosopher: The Earliest Texts on the Astrolabe and Arabic Astrology at Fleury, Micy and Chartres', in Burnett, *Arabic into Latin in the Middle Ages*, pp. 329–68 at pp. 330–1; Jonathan Lyons, *The House of Wisdom: How the Arabs Transformed Western Civilisation* (London, 2009), p. 117.

6 Zuccato, 'Arabic Singing Girls, the Pope, and the Astrolabe', p. 104; Charles Burnett, 'The Semantics

of Indian Numbers in Arabic, Greek and Latin', *Journal of Indian Philosophy* Vol. 34 (2006), pp. 15–30 at p. 18.

7 Burnett, 'The Coherence of the Arabic–Latin Translation Program in Toledo in the Twelfth Century', p. 250; Violet Moller, *The Map of Knowledge: A Thousand-Year History of How Classical Ideas Were Lost and Found* (London, 2019), p. 127.

8 Burnett, 'The Coherence of the Arabic–Latin Translation Program in Toledo in the Twelfth Century', pp. 249–50; Moller, *The Map of Knowledge*, p. 127.

9 John Beckwith, 'The Influence of Islamic Art on Western Medieval Art', *Apollo* (1 April 1976), p. 279; Émile Mâle, *Art and Artists of the Middle Ages*, trans. Sylvia Stallings Lowe (Redding Ridge, Conn., 1986), pp. 34–78; Meyer Schapiro, *Romanesque Architectural Sculpture: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures*, ed. Linda Seidel (Chicago, 2006), pp. 47, 151, 202; Katherine Watson, *French Romanesque and Islam: Andalusian Elements in French Architectural Decoration, c.1030–1180* (London, 1989), pp. 116–20, 250–5, 257 n. 12; Kenneth John Conant, *Carolingian and Romanesque Architecture, 800–1200* (London, 1993), pp. 173, 199, 303–4; John Beckwith, *Early Medieval Art: Carolingian, Ottonian, Romanesque* (London, 1964), pp. 206–18; John W. Williams, 'León and the Beginnings of the Spanish Romanesque', in *The Art of Medieval Spain, a.d. 500–1200* (New York, 1994), pp. 167–73.

10 Kathleen Batsford, *The Green Man* (Woodbridge, 1978). The case for this is well argued in Ronald Hutton's Gresham College lecture *How Pagan Was Medieval Britain?*, 7 June 2023, https://www.gresham.ac.uk/sites/default/files/transcript/2023-06-07-1800 Hutton-T.pdf

11 Vicente Cantarino, 'The Spanish Reconquest: A Cluniac Holy War against Islam?', in Khalil I. Semaan (ed.), *Islam and the Mediaeval West: Aspects of Intercultural Relations* (New York, 1980), pp. 82–109 at p. 98; Joan Evans, *Cluniac Art of the Romanesque Period* (Cambridge, 1950), pp. 38–40; A. MacKay, *Spain in the Middle Ages: From Frontier to Empire, 1000–1500* (London, 1977), pp. 20–4.

12 Catlos, *Kingdoms of Faith*, p. 233.

13 Anwar Chejne, 'The Role of al-Andalus in the Movement of Ideas between Islam and the West', in Semaan (ed.), *Islam and the Medieval West*, pp. 110–33 at p. 118; Moller, *The Map of Knowledge*, p. 144.

14 S. Frederick Starr, *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane* (Princeton, 2013), p. 13; Moller, *The Map of Knowledge*, p. 133. In his *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages*, Sir Richard Southern compares the scholarly resources available to two rough contemporaries: Gerbert of Aurillac in France (few and far between) and Avicenna in Bukhara (richly abundant). He concludes, 'If Gerbert had been born in Bukhara instead of Aurillac, and if he had taught in Baghdad or Isfahan, instead of at Rheims, he would have found himself in a society intellectually much more congenial to him than that of the West, and he would have had all the books he could desire.' Sir Richard Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962), pp. 8–10.

15 Moller, *The Map of Knowledge*, p. 131.

16 Richard Fletcher, *The Cross and the Crescent: Christianity and Islam from Muhammad to the Reformation* (London, 2003), pp. 116–21. The phrase 'the Renaissance of the Twelfth Century' was originally coined by Charles Homer Haskins in his 1927 book of that title. Burnett, 'The Coherence of the Arabic–Latin Translation Program in Toledo in the Twelfth Century', pp. 252–3.

17 Moller, *The Map of Knowledge*, p. 142.

18 Burnett, 'The Coherence of the Arabic–Latin Translation Program in Toledo in the Twelfth Century', p. 255.

19 Moller, *The Map of Knowledge*, p. 147.

20 F. Nau, 'Notes d'astronomie indienne', *Journal Asiatique* 10th Series, Vol. 16 (1910), pp. 209–25; Burnett, 'The Semantics of Indian Numbers in Arabic, Greek and Latin', pp. 15–30.

21 Burnett, 'King Ptolemy and Alchandreus the Philosopher', p. 331; Burnett, 'The Semantics of Indian Numbers in Arabic, Greek and Latin', p. 17; Jim al-Khalili, *Pathfinders: The Golden Age of Arabic Science* (London, 2010), p. 202.

22 These were known as *ghubar* or numbers because they could be scratched on dust or sand smoothed over an abacus board. Louise Cochrane, *Adelard of Bath: The First English Scientist* (London, 1994), p. 24. Charles Burnett, 'Antioch as a Link between Arabic and Latin Culture', in Burnett, *Arabic into Latin in the Middle Ages*, pp. 1–66, esp. pp. 13–14. Burnett believes the original forms were altered with Visigothic innovations. R. Lemay, 'The Hispanic Origins of our Current Number Forms', *Viator* Vol. 8 (1977), pp. 435–62.

23 Burnett, ‘The Semantics of Indian Numbers in Arabic, Greek and Latin’, pp. 17–19.
24 Catlos, *Kingdoms of Faith*, p. 170.
25 Burnett, ‘King Ptolemy and Alchandreus the Philosopher’, pp. 330–1.
26 Moller, *The Map of Knowledge*, p. 124.
27 Cochrane, *Adelard of Bath*, p. 7; Catlos, *Kingdoms of Faith*, p. 170.
28 Lynn Thorndike, *Michael Scot* (Edinburgh, 1965); Burnett, ‘The Coherence of the Arabic–Latin Translation Program in Toledo in the Twelfth Century’, p. 263; Catlos, *Kingdoms of Faith*, pp. 294–5; Moller, *The Map of Knowledge*, pp. 209–10.
29 Burnett, ‘The Coherence of the Arabic–Latin Translation Program in Toledo in the Twelfth Century’, p. 253.
30 Cochrane, *Adelard of Bath.*
31 Moller, *The Map of Knowledge*, p. 198.
32 Ibid., p. 200.
33 Adelard of Bath, *Conversations with his Nephew: On the Same and the Different, Questions on Natural Science and On Birds*, ed. and trans. Charles Burnett (Cambridge, 1998), p. 3.
34 Ibid., p. 185; Cochrane, *Adelard of Bath*, pp. 29–30; Lyons, *The House of Wisdom*, pp. 103–4.
35 Adelard of Bath, *Conversations with his Nephew*, pp. 5, 73.
36 Ibid., p. 105.
37 Adelard of Bath, *De opere astrolapsus*, Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, McLean Ms 165, f.81r, quoted by Cochrane, *Adelard of Bath*, p. 98; Charles Burnett, *The Introduction of Arabic Learning into England* (London, 1996), pp. 31–2.
38 Fletcher, *The Cross and the Crescent*, p. 117.
39 Cochrane, *Adelard of Bath*, pp. 75–6, 103.
40 John Beckwith, *Caskets from Cordoba* (London, 1960), p. 34; Chejne, ‘The Role of al-Andalus in the Movement of Ideas between Islam and the West’, pp. 118–21.
41 Helena M. Gamer, ‘The Earliest Evidence of Chess in Western Literature: The Einsiedeln Verses’, *Speculum* Vol. 29, No. 4 (October 1954), pp. 734–50.
42 Olivia Remie Constable, ‘Chess and Courtly Culture in Medieval Castile: The “Libro de ajedrez” of Alfonso X, el Sabio’, *Speculum* Vol. 82, No. 2 (April 2007), pp. 301–47.
43 Joshua C. Birk, *Norman Kings of Sicily and the Rise of the Anti-Islamic Critique* (London, 2017), p. 218.
44 Dirk Booms and Peter Higgs, *Sicily: Culture and Conquest* (London, 2016), p. 230.
45 George Makdisi, ‘On the Origin and Development of the College in Islam and the West’, in Khalil I. Semaan (ed.), *Islam and the Medieval West: Aspects of Intercultural Relations* (Albany, NY, 1980), pp. 26–49 at pp. 41–2.
46 Ibid., pp. 26–49; George Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh, 1981).
47 Eric Seldeslachts, ‘Greece, The Final Frontier? The Westward Spread of Buddhism’, in Ann Heirman and Stephan Peter Bumbacher (eds), *The Spread of Buddhism* (Leiden, 2012), p. 144; Christopher I. Beckwith, *Warriors of the Cloisters: The Central Asian Origins of Science in the Medieval World* (Princeton, 2012); Richard W. Bulliet, ‘Naw Bahār and the Survival of Iranian Buddhism’, *Iran* Vol. 14 (1976), pp. 140–5.
48 J. Pedersen and G. Makdisi, ‘The Institution in the Arabic, Persian and Turkish Lands’, in J. Pedersen et al., *Madrasa*, in *Encyclopedia of Islam, Two*, Vol. 5 (1986), pp. 1,123–34; Christopher I. Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present* (Princeton, 2009), pp. 153–4; Beckwith, *Warriors of the Cloisters*, p. 42.
49 Beckwith, *Warriors of the Cloisters*, pp. 40–2. Beckwith believes that it is ‘absolutely certain’ that the four-iwan plan of the conventional madrasa has its origin in pre-Islamic examples such as Adzhina-Tepa in Tajikistan: ‘It has actually been known for almost a century, though little recognized by most scholars, that the medieval Central Asian Islamic college, the madrasa, is an Islamicized form of the earlier Central Asian Buddhist college, the vihara. The two are virtually identical in form, function, teaching program, and legal status. The identity of the unique architectural form of the Central Asian vihara and madrasa has also been established by archaeologists, whose discoveries have confirmed the much earlier arguments of Barthold. The typical Central Asian vihara had a square or rectangular plan, which is replicated in the madrasa. In addition to the combination of functions and endowment, the discovery and excavation of a pre-Islamic example of the vihara found at Adzhina-Tepa in Tajikistan

make it absolutely certain that the typical rectangular four-iwan-style madrasa is simply an Islamicized version of the identical four-iwan-style vihara. Of the many viharas that once existed in the area of Khuttal (in what is now southern Tajikistan), archaeologists have excavated the remains of several, including the one at Adzhina Tepa, which was destroyed during the mid-eighth-century wars in the region. It already has what became the stereotypical Central Asian and Iranian madrasa plan: a quadrangle with one or two floors of arcaded hallways opening onto a central courtyard. Behind the arcades are cells for the resident scholars. In the center of each side is a large half-domed space – an iwan – the open side of which faces the courtyard … The earliest examples of viharas built according to the plan of Adzhina Tepa have been found in the ruins of the great city of Taxila (Takshashila), dating to the period of the Kushan Empire (ca. 50 bc–ad 225).' Beckwith, *Warriors of the Cloisters*, pp. 40–1.

50 Ibid., pp. 3, 37–40, 45–7.

51 This section is drawn from the enjoyably provocative arguments put forward in Beckwith's *Warriors of the Cloisters*.

52 This argument is made most convincingly at book length in ibid.

53 For strong criticism of Beckwith's argument see, for example, Johannes Bronkhorst, 'Abhidharma and Indian Thinking' in *Text, History and Philosophy: Abidharma across Buddhist Scholastic Traditions*, Bart Dessein and Weijen Teng (eds), (Leiden, 2016), p. 39–42.

54 Ibid., ch. 2, 'The Recursive Argument Method of Medieval Science'.

55 Burnett, 'Antioch as a Link between Arabic and Latin Culture', pp. 1–66, esp. pp. 16–17; Lyons, *The House of Wisdom*, pp. 170–1.

56 Charles Burnett, 'Fibonacci's "Method of the Indians" ', in his *Numerals and Arithmetic in the Middle Ages* (Farnham, 2010), pp. 87–97.

57 *Fibonacci's Liber Abaci: A Translation into Modern English of Leonardo Pisano's Book of Calculation*, trans. and ed. L. E. Sigler (New York, 2002), p. 17; Lyons, *The House of Wisdom*, p. 170; George Gheverghese Joseph, *The Crest of the Peacock: Non-European Roots of Mathematics* (Princeton, 2011), pp. 465–6; George Gheverghese Joseph, *Indian Mathematics: Engaging with the World from Ancient to Modern Times* (London, 2016).

58 *Fibonacci's Liber Abaci: A Translation*, pp. 404–5.

59 Charles Seife, *Zero*: *The Biography of a Dangerous Idea* (London, 2000), p. 79.

60 William Granara, *Narrating Muslim Sicily: War and Peace in the Medieval Mediterranean World* (London, 2019), pp. 181–3; Thomas Curtis Van Cleve, *The Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen: Immutator Mundi* (Oxford, 1972), p. 225.

61 Van Cleve, *The Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen*, p. 303; Georgina Masson, *Frederick II of Hohenstaufen: A Life* (London, 1957), p. 32.

62 Charles Burnett, 'Master Theodore, Frederick II's Philosopher', in his *Arabic into Latin in the Middle Ages*, pp. 225–85 at p. 248.

63 David Abulafia, *Frederick II: A Medieval Emperor* (London, 2002), p. 247; Van Cleve, *The Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen*, p. 304.

64 Alex Metcalfe, *Muslims of Medieval Italy* (Edinburgh, 2009), p. 243.

65 Abulafia, *Frederick II*, p. 148; Burnett, 'Master Theodore, Frederick II's Philosopher', pp. 252–3, 264; Van Cleve, *The Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen*, pp. 304–6.

66 Keith Devlin, *The Man of Numbers: Fibonacci's Arithmetic Revolution* (London, 2011), analyses the three questions in detail.

67 Lyons, *The House of Wisdom*, pp. 170–1.

68 *Fibonacci's Liber Abaci: A Translation*, p. 17.

69 Joseph, *The Crest of the Peacock*, p. 466.

70 In addition to the Srirangam Kallupalli, dated by inscriptiom to 734 CE two south Indian mosques claim very early dates that remain impossible to verify: the mosque said to have been built in Thrissur, Kerala under the Cheras (the Cheraman Juma Masjid, improbably said to have been constructed in 629 ce); that in Kilakarai, Tamil Nadu built under the patronage of the Pandiyas of Madurai (the Pallaiya Juma Masjid, which also claims an historically dubious date as early 628–9 ce). For discussions on India's earliest mosques see Mehrdad Shokoohy, *Muslim Architecture of South India: The Sultanate of Ma'bar and the Traditions of Maritime Settlers on the Malabar and Coromandel Coasts* (London, 2011). Also Dr Raja Mohamad, Islamic Architecture in Tamil Nadu (Chennai., 2004) Alka Patel, 'The Mosque in South Asia: Beginnings', in Finbarr Barry Flood (ed.), *Piety and Politics in the Early Indian Mosque* (New

Delhi, 2008), pp. 3–28.

71 Patel, 'The Mosque in South Asia', pp. 12–13.

72 Audrey Truschke, *The Language of History: Sanskrit Narratives of Muslim Pasts* (New Delhi, 2021), p. 6.

73 André Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, Vol. 2: *Slave Kings and the Islamic Conquest, 11th–13th Centuries* (Leiden, 1977), pp. 144–5; Richard M. Eaton, *India in the Persianate Age: 1000–1765* (London, 2019), p. 32.

74 David C. Thomas, *The Ebb and Flow of the Ghurid Empire* (Sydney, 2018), pp. 83–6.

75 Eaton, *India in the Persianate Age*, p. 5.

76 Wink, *Al-Hind*, Vol. 2, p. 144.

77 Truschke, *The Language of History*, p. 21.

78 *Prithvirajavijaya* 1 50–1, in ibid., p. 26.

79 Eaton, *India in the Persianate Age*, pp. 31, 64.

80 Bedasruti Bhattacharyya, 'Varman's Incursion and Sacking and Burning of Somapura Mahavihara (Varendri)', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* Vol. 73 (2012), pp. 46–9; Anirudh Kanisetti, 'South Asia's greatest stupa isn't in India but Bangladesh. This is its story', *The Print*, 4 May 2023.

81 Steven Darian, 'Buddhism in Bihar from the Eighth to the Twelfth Century with Special Reference to Nalanda', *Asiatische Studien / Études Asiatiques* Vol. 25 (1971), pp. 335–52 at p. 346.

82 Frederick M. Asher, *Nalanda: Situating the Great Monastery* (New Delhi, 2015); Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade: The Realignment of India–China Relations, 600–1400* (London, 2016), p. 117. The argument about the fate of Nalanda rages on. Those who blame Khalji include Sanjeev Sanyal, *The Ocean of Churn: How the Indian Ocean Shaped Human History* (New Delhi, 2016), pp. 145–6. Those who absolve him include D. N. Jha, *Against the Grain* (New Delhi, 2018), pp. 101–2, 186–92, and Johan Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road* (Philadelphia, 2010), pp. 1–2, who points out that 'the Dharma survived in India until the seventeenth century. Or, in other words, Buddhists and Muslims lived together on the Asian subcontinent for almost a thousand years. Why is this not better known?' The best-sourced and fullest study of the last days of Nalanda is Darian, 'Buddhism in Bihar from the Eighth to the Twelfth Century with Special Reference to Nalanda', p. 346. For the last Nalanda monk making it to the court of Kublai Khan, see Arthur Waley, 'New Light on Buddhism in Mediaeval India', *Mélanges Chinois et Bouddhiques* Vol. 1 (1931–2), pp. 355–76.

83 Sukumar Dutt, *Buddhist Monks and Monasteries of India: Their History and their Contribution to Indian Culture* (Delhi, 1962), pp. 357–8.

84 Wink, *Al-Hind*, Vol. 2, pp. 146–7; Eaton, *India in the Persianate Age*, p. 58.

85 Wink, *Al-Hind*, Vol. 2, p. 117.

86 Ibid., pp. 146–7; Lars Fogelin, *An Archaeological History of Indian Buddhism* (Oxford, 2015), p. 222.

87 Marie Favereau, *The Horde: How the Mongols Changed the World* (Cambridge, Mass., 2021), p. 51.

88 Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (London, 2015), pp. 158–63.

89 Wink, *Al-Hind*, Vol. 2, p. 202.

90 Mongol invasions of India – literally dozens of them (enumerated in Peter Jackson's *Delhi Sultanate*) – persisted throughout the rest of the 13th and well into the 14th century. These repeated invasions left a deep impression on north Indians, not just those who resisted the Mongols, but the throngs of traumatised, uprooted refugees and their descendants. Arguably, those invasions instilled an early, proto-nationalist sentiment of India – at least north India – as a single state: Hindustan (it's likely that the failed Mongol invasions of Japan similarly instilled a proto-nationalist sentiment among the Japanese).

What spared India from Mongol devastation, apart from its demonic-looking wildlife, was the Delhi Sultanate's highly focused state policy that lasted nearly two centuries. Both the Khalaji and the Tughluq invasions of the Deccan were driven mainly by the need to acquire cash for garrisoning soldiers in the north-western passes to defend India from the Mongols. So it was not just a single rhino that kept the Mongols out, but decades of concerted effort and enormous expense. Indeed, Delhi's success in this effort was arguably the Sultanate's most singular achievement.

91 Eaton, *India in the Persianate Age*, pp. 47, 51.

92 Ibid., p. 48.

93 Anthony Reid, 'Islamicization and Christianization in Southeast Asia: The Critical Phase, 1550–1650', in Anthony Reid (ed.), *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era: Trade, Power and Belief* (Ithaca, NY,

1993), pp. 151–79.

94 Initially, the conquests caused severe shocks to transregional overland trade everywhere, but those overland networks – including those with India – did slowly recover. It is true that the Mongols sacked Lahore in 1241, but Irfan Habib argues that, on the whole, the Delhi sultanate in the 13th and 14th centuries enjoyed a flourishing economy that 'must have necessitated commerce on a large scale' (*Camb. Econ. Hist. of India, 1:82-86*). The Mongol historian Thomas T. Allsen argues that overland and maritime trade did somehow coexist and flourish under Mongol rule, creating an integrated system that moved goods both from east to west and north to south. He also shows how the Mongols' marketing strategies used maritime communication networks that had been created by Indian-Buddhist and Muslim merchants skilled in cross-cultural commerce (*The Steppe and the Sea: Pearls in the Mongol Empire, 2019*).

Based on tariff lists produced in Yemen, we also know that in the 13th century, during Mongol rule, Indian Ocean trade routes connecting the Middle East to India (Coromandel, Malabar, Gujarat) and China were closely linked to inland routes in Iraq and Iran, refuting notions of supposed economic decline in these regions (Yasuhiro Yokkaichi, 'Maritime and Continental Networks of Kish Merchants under Mongol Rule: the Role of the Indian Ocean, Fars and Iraq', in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 62 (2019), pp. 428–63.

95 Eaton, *India in the Persianate Age*, pp. 93–4.

96 Ibid., pp. 53–4.

97 Sunil Sharma, *Amir Khusraw: The Poet of Sultans and Sufis* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 1, 7, 37–8.

98 Eaton, *India in the Persianate Age*, pp. 47–8.

99 Ibid., pp. 60–1.

100 Ibid., pp. 386–7.

101 Mark Zebrowski, *The Architecture and Art of the Deccan Sultanates* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 163.

102 Eaton, *India in the Persianate Age*, pp. 147–8.

103 Moller, *The Map of Knowledge*, pp. 235–7.

104 William Dalrymple, *The Anarchy: The Relentless Rise of the East India Company* (London, 2019).

105 Eaton, *India in the Persianate* Age, pp. 53–4.

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Golden Road Glossary

Bodhisattva: (in Mahayana Buddhism) a person who is able to reach nirvana but delays doing so through compassion for suffering beings

Brahmin: The highest priestly caste within Hindu society

Chakra: Wheel, as in wheel of law or *dharma*. Also refers to energy points in the body

Chan: Zen

Darshan: 'showing'– the auspicious sight of a deity or a holy person

Dharani: a Buddhist mantra or spell

Esoteric Buddhism: the mystical interpretation and practice of the belief system founded by the Buddha

Hashemites: The Arab descendants, either direct or collateral, of the prophet Muhammad. From among these came the family that created the 20th-century Hashemite dynasty that once ruled the Hejaz, Jordan and Iraq

Himatia: A type of clothing, a mantle or wrap worn by ancient Greek men and women from the Archaic period through the Hellenistic period. The Greek toga

Hinayana: Sanskrit term, mildly disparaging, applied collectively to the *Śrāvakayāna* and *Pratyekabuddhayāna* paths of Buddhism. This term appeared around the first or second century. Hīnayāna was thus contrasted with *Mahāyāna*, which means the 'Great Vehicle'. The phrase reflects the prejudices of Mahayanists that Theravadist Buddhists were the 'Lesser Vehicle'

Lingam: a votary object that symbolizes the god Shiva and is revered as an emblem of generative power

Mahayana: lit. 'Great Vehicle') is a term for a broad group of Buddhist traditions, texts, philosophies, and practices developed in ancient India from 1st century BCE onwards. It is considered one of the three main existing branches of Buddhism

Mandala: a geometric configuration of symbol used to create a sacred space)

Mandate of Heaven: ('Heaven's Command') is a Chinese political ideology that was used in Ancient China and Imperial China to legitimize the rule of the king or emperor of China

Nayanar: lit. 'hounds of Siva', and later 'teachers of Shiva . A group of 63 Tamil Hindu saints living during the 6th to 8th centuries CE who were devoted to the Hindu god Shiva

Nikaya Buddhism: Theravada or (disparagingly) *Hinayana.* The early Buddhist traditions

Pala: an Indian imperial dynasty centered in present-day Bengal, ruling from 750–1174 CE

Puja: a ritual of devotional worship, to host and honour a guest, or one to celebrate an event

Puranas: a vast genre of Hindu literature. Composed originally in Sanskrit (and later in other Indian languages), several of these texts are named after major Hindu gods such as Vishnu, Shiva, Brahma, and Adi Shakti

Qawwali: a form of Sufi Islamic devotional singing originating in Nizamuddin in Delhi and spreading from there across South Asia. Originally performed at Sufi shrines or dargahs throughout South Asia

Ksatriya: the Hindu warrior caste

Kumb Mela: a major pilgrimage festival in Hinduism, held on the banks of sacred rivers

Sampot: a long, rectangular cloth worn around the lower body. The traditional dress of Cambodia

Sangha: The Buddhist monastic community

Shastra: Sanskrit word that means 'precept, rules, manual, compendium, book or treatise' in a general sense. The word is generally used as a suffix in the Indian literature context, for technical or specialized knowledge in a defined area of practice

Siddhi: spell

Stupa: In Buddhism, a stupa (lit. 'heap', IAST: *stūpa*) is a mound-like or hemispherical structure containing relics

Sutras: in Hinduism, a brief aphoristic composition; in Buddhism, a more extended exposition, the basic form of the scriptures of both the Theravada (Way of Elders) and Mahayana (Greater Vehicle) traditions

Theravada: The 'Way of the Elders'. The most common name of Buddhism's oldest existing school

Tusita heaven: is one of the six deva-worlds of the Desire Realm (Kāmadhātu), located between the Yāma heaven and the *Nirmān.arati* heaven. Like the other heavens, *Tuṣita* is said to be reachable through meditation. It is the heaven where the Bodhisattva Śvetaketu (Pāli: Setaketu, 'White Banner') resided before being reborn on Earth as Gautama, the historical Buddha; it is, likewise, the heaven where the Bodhisattva Nātha ('Protector') currently resides, who will later be born as the next Buddha, Maitreya

Urna: In Buddhist art and culture, the Urna is a spiral or circular dot placed on the forehead of Buddhist images as an auspicious mark

Vairocana Buddha: The cosmic Buddha of Great Illumination, whose. body is infinitely large and whose life is infinitely long

Vedas: a large body of religious texts originating in ancient India. Composed in Vedic Sanskrit, the texts constitute the oldest layer of Sanskrit literature and the oldest scriptures of Hinduism

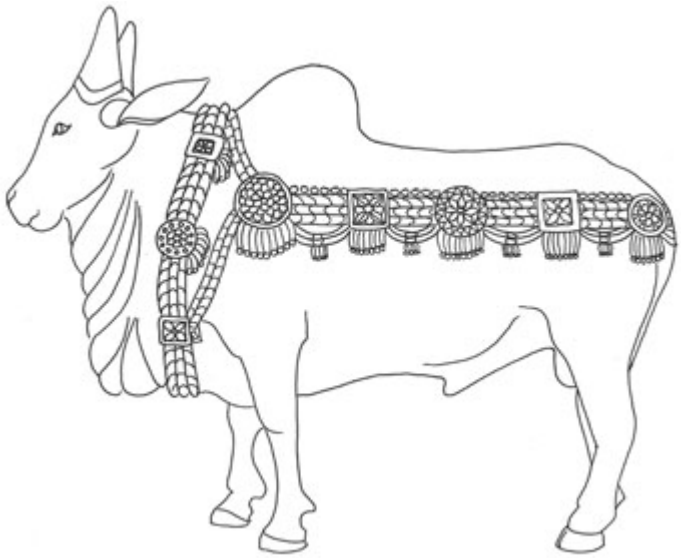
Vinaya: the word Vinaya is derived from a Sanskrit verb that can mean to lead, take away, train, tame, or guide, or alternately to educate or teach. The Vinaya texts) are texts of the Buddhist canon (*Tripitaka*) that also contain the rules and precepts for fully ordained monks and nuns of Buddhist Sangha, initially developed thirteen years after the Buddha's enlightenment

Yantra: a Tantric geometrical diagram

Yoni: an abstract or aniconic representation, of sculpted in stone in a Hindu temple and in association with a ligam of the Hindu goddess Shakti. It is usually shown with its masculine counterpart. Together, they symbolize the merging of microcosmos and macrocosmos, the divine eternal process of creation and regeneration, and the union of the feminine and the masculine that recreates all of existence

Yogacara: an influential tradition of Buddhist philosophy and psychology emphasizing the study of cognition, perception, and consciousness through the interior lens of meditation, as well as philosophical reasoning. Yogachara was one of the two most influential traditions of Mahayana Buddhism in India

Zen: From Chinese 'Chán'; in Korean: Sŏn; and Vietnamese: Thiền, is a school of Mahayana Buddhism that originated in India, was said to have been brought to China by Boddhidharma during the Tang dynasty as the Chan School (*chánzōng*, 'meditation school') or the Buddha-mind school and later developed into various sub-schools and branches. From China, Chán spread south to Vietnam and became Vietnamese Thiền, northeast to Korea to become Seon Buddhism, and east to Japan, becoming Japanese Zen



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A Note on the Author

William Dalrymple is one of Britain's great historians and the bestselling author of the Wolfson Prize-winning *White Mughals*, *The Last Mughal*, which won the Duff Cooper Prize, and the Hemingway and Kapuściński Prize-winning *Return of a King*. *The Anarchy* won the Arthur Ross Medal from the US Council on Foreign Relations. A frequent broadcaster, he has written and presented three television series, one of which won the Grierson Award for Best Documentary Series at BAFTA. He has also won the Thomas Cook Travel Book Award, the *Sunday Times* Young British Writer of the Year Award, the Foreign Correspondent of the Year at the FPA Media Awards, and been awarded five honorary doctorates. He is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, the Royal Asiatic Society, the Royal Society of Edinburgh, and has held visiting fellowships at Princeton, Brown and All Souls College, University of Oxford. He writes regularly for the *New York Review of Books*, the *New Yorker* and the *Guardian*. In 2018 he was presented with the prestigious President's Medal by the British Academy for his outstanding literary achievement and for co-founding the Jaipur Literature Festival. He is the co-host of chart-topping podcast *Empire* with Anita Anand. William lives with his wife and three children on a farm outside Delhi.

Plate Section

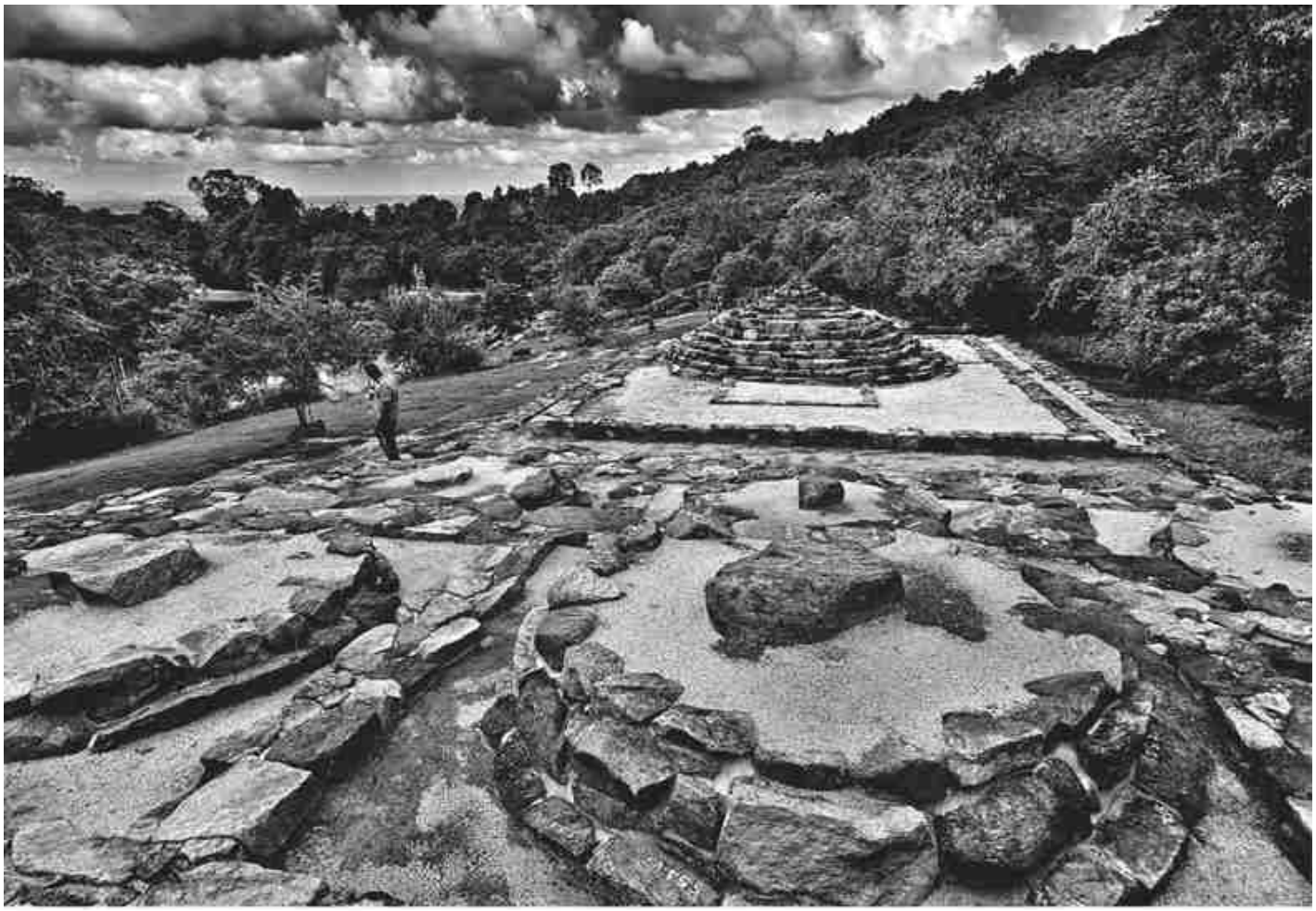
Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara from Ajanta Cave 1, c.475 CE. A being of otherworldly beauty and compassion, eyes half-

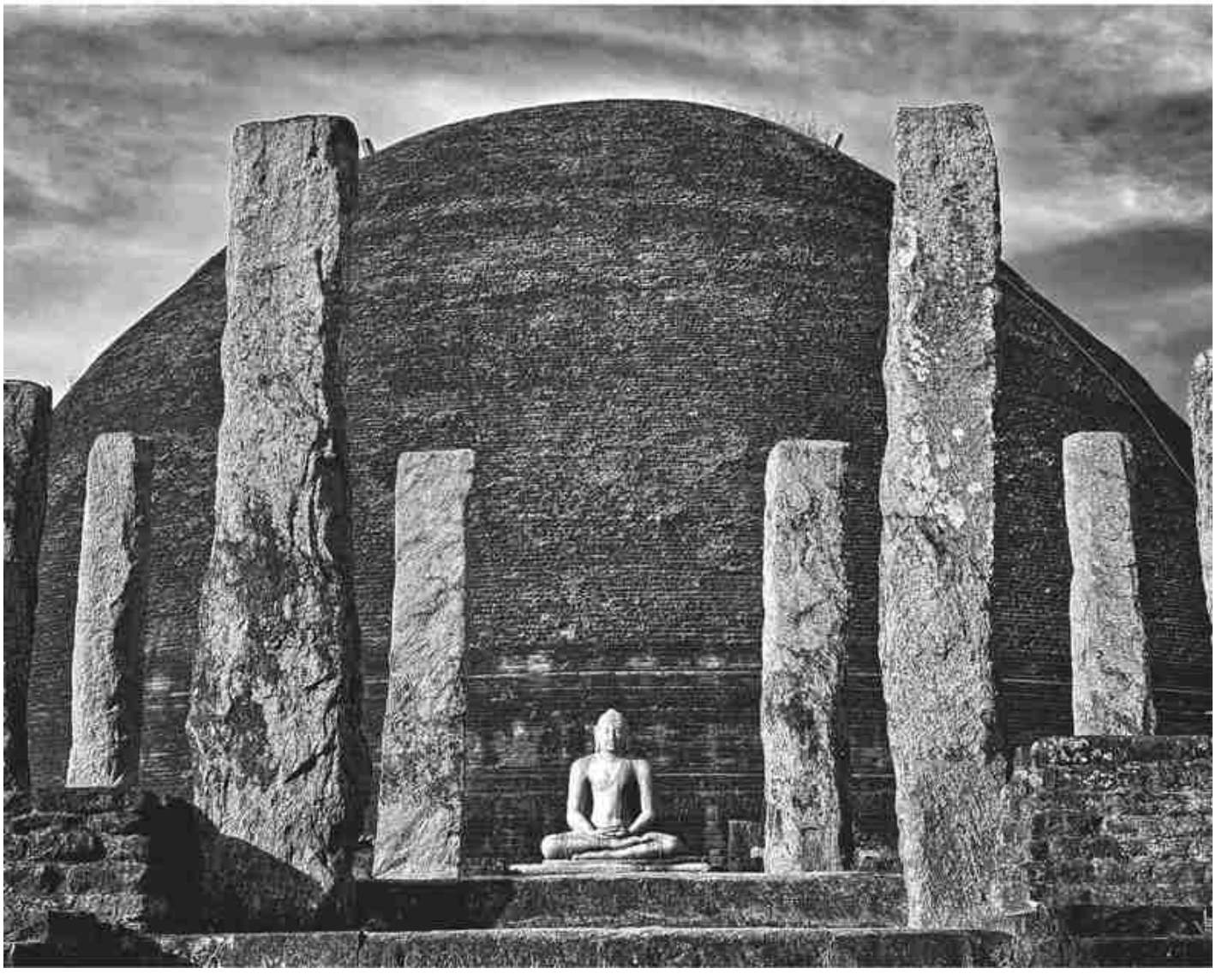
closed, weightlessly swaying on the threshold of Enlightenment.

Four newly revealed faces from the oldest set of Buddhist murals in existence at Ajanta Cave 10, c.100 BCE. The murals illustrate the *Shyama Jataka*, which tells the story of Shyama, a virtuous forest-dweller fatally hit by the poisoned arrow

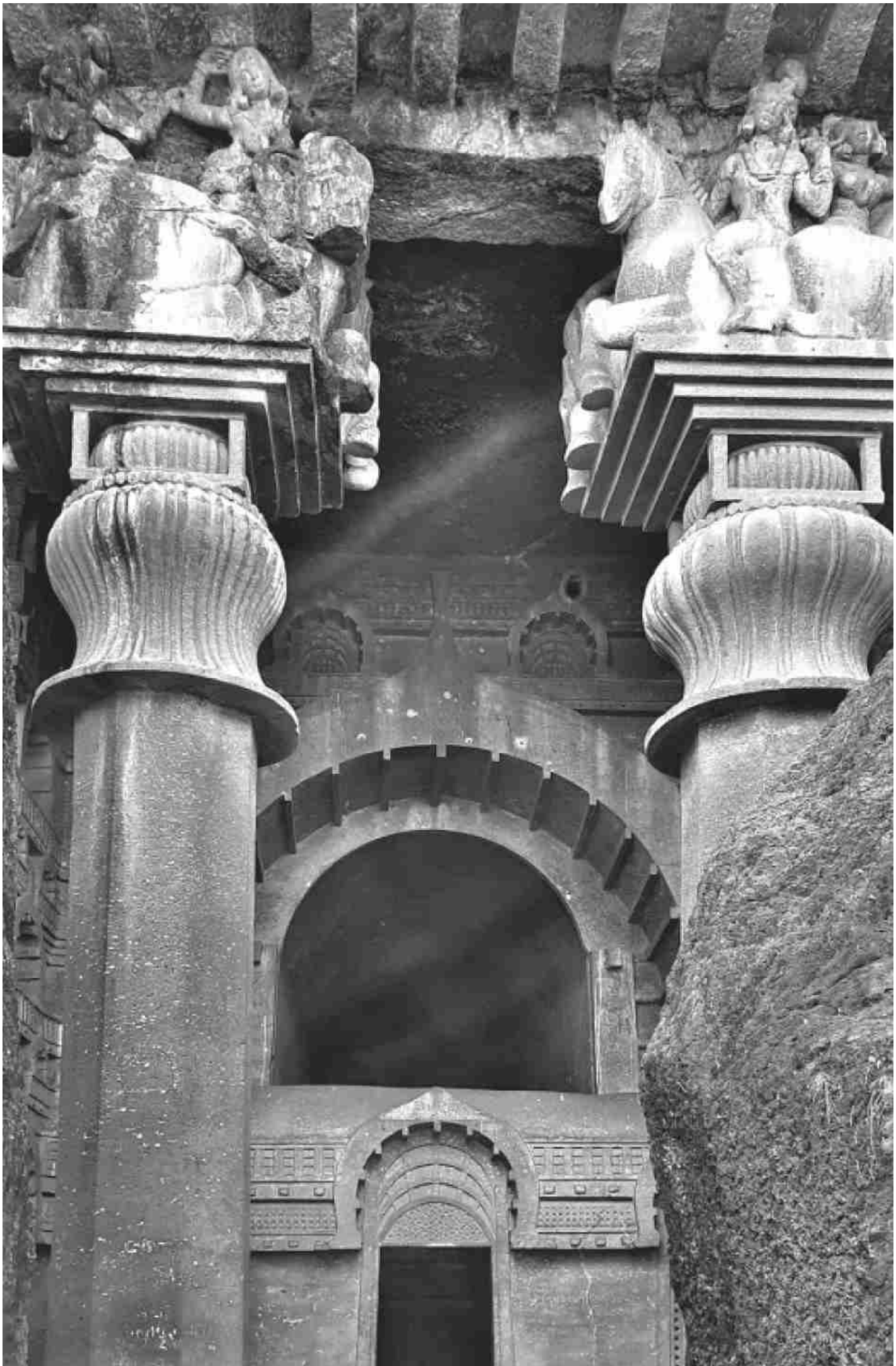
of the King of Varanasi, but revived to become the king's instructor in dharma.

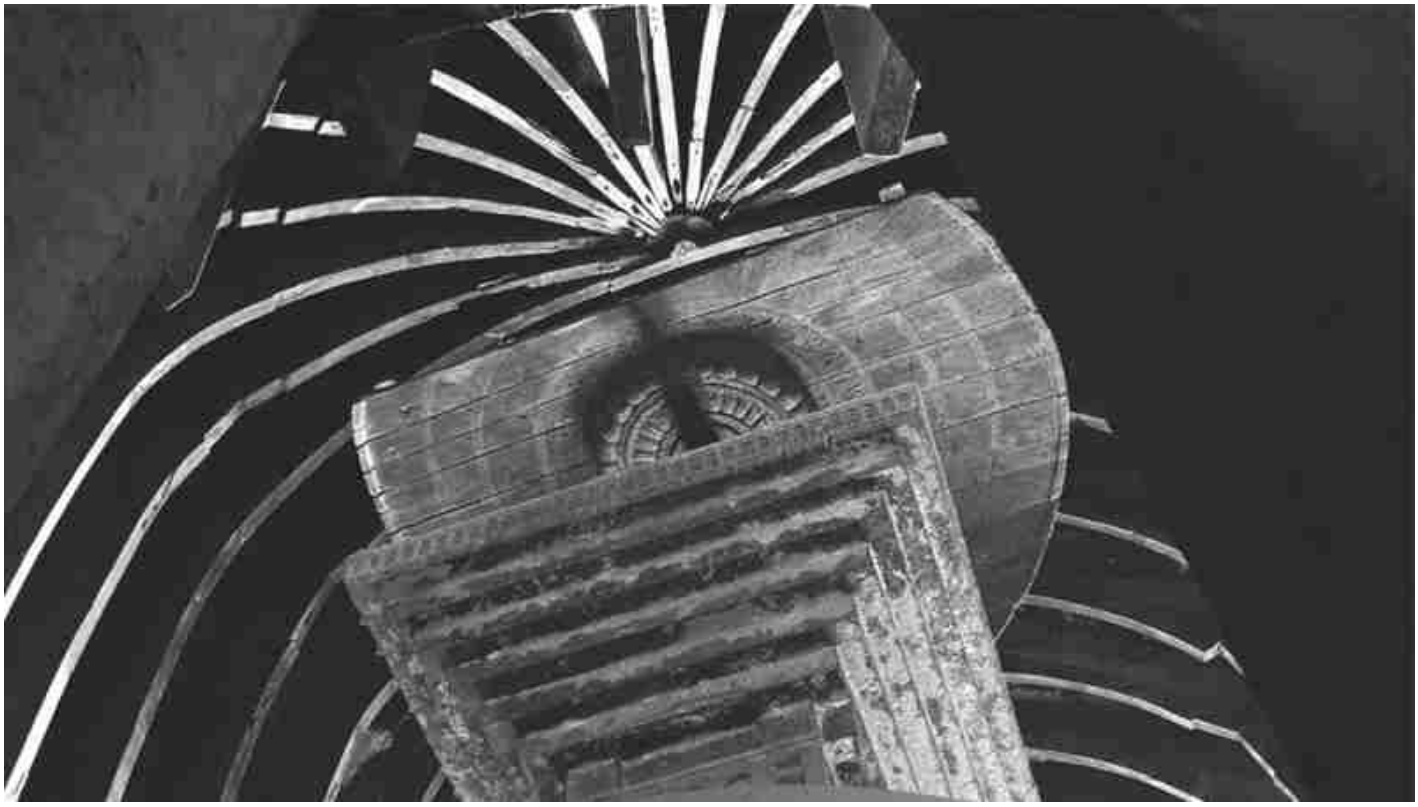
The great Lion Capital of Ashoka from Sarnath, c.250 BCE.

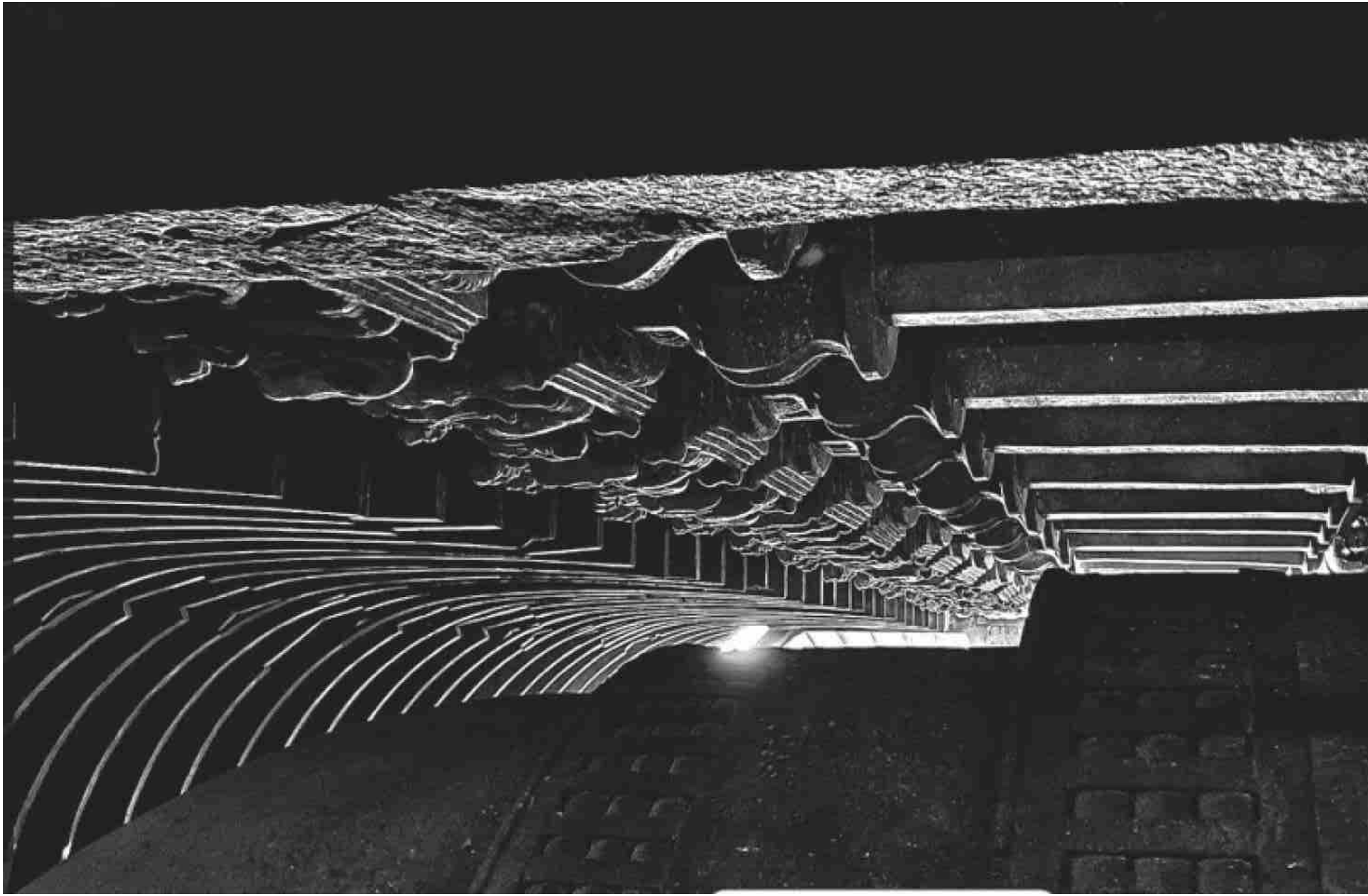




Ashoka sent his son and daughter south to his ally, the Raja of Sri Lanka. Ashoka's son Mahinda preached for twenty-six days in a royal park outside the capital, Anuradhapura, where vast crowds assembled. In 250 BCE, the Raja converted to Buddhism. Buddhist monasteries were founded in Anuradhapura in the north of the island (bottom right), in Tissamaharama in the south (bottom left) and on the newly excavated site of Rajagala atop a mountain in the centre, where a Brahmi inscription says Mahinda's relics were laid to rest within a shallow stupa (top left). After the destruction of Anuradhapura by the Cholas in 993 CE, the capital shifted to Polonnaruwa (top right).



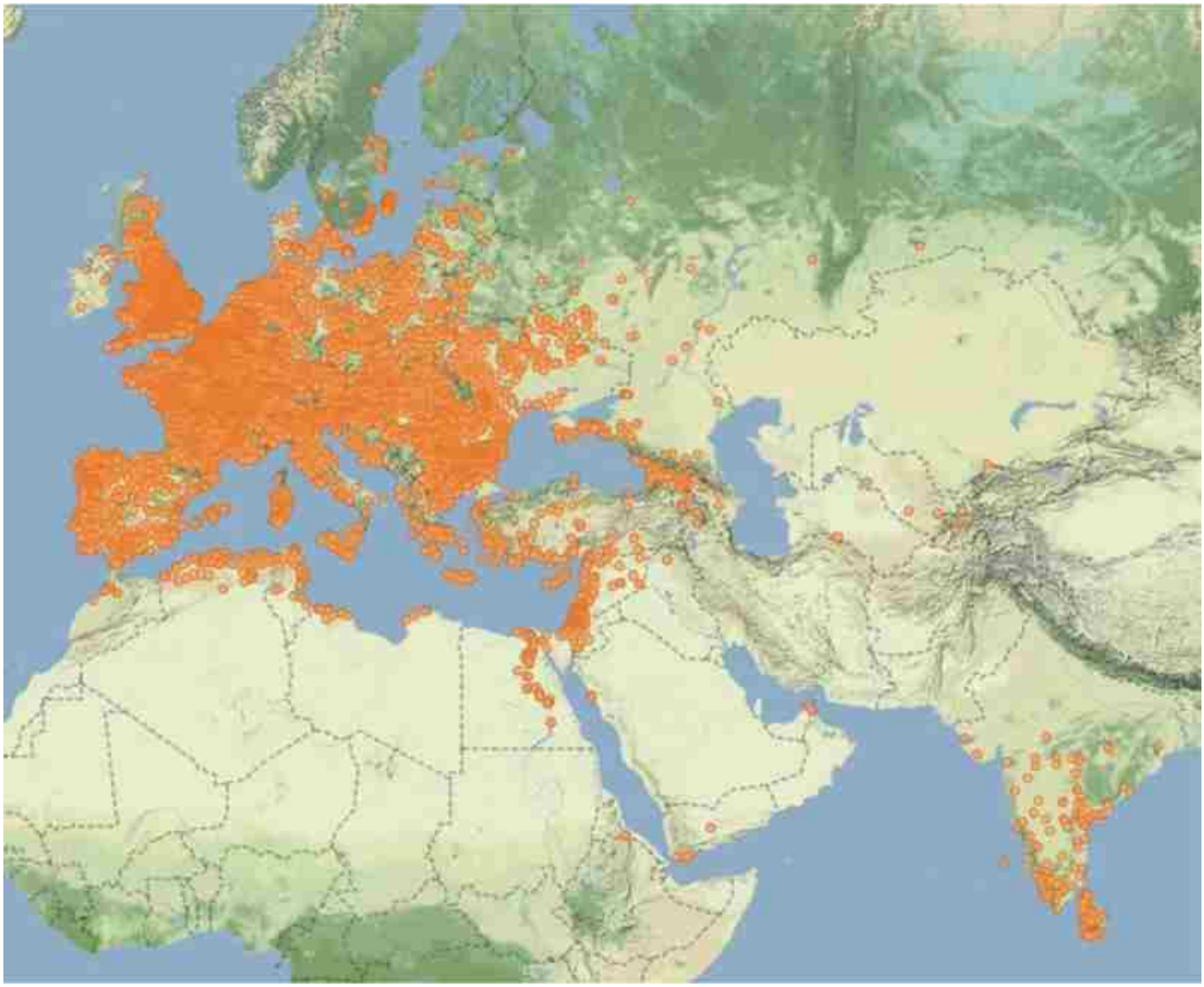




Over a thousand early rockcut cave monasteries still honeycomb the ghats of western India. Arguably the oldest near-intact Buddhist monastery in the world is the great hall of Bhaja near Pune (bottom right). Entered by a magnificent horseshoe arch thirty feet tall, the hall has ancient wooden roof beams that are miraculously preserved, like the wrecked keel of a prehistoric ark smashed against the rocky ceiling of the cave (bottom left). The capitals of the neighbouring caves at Bedsa show the influence of ancient Persian sculpture, with turbaned riders sitting atop exotic beasts (top left). At Karle, near Pune, in a magnificent rock-cut basilica the size of a cathedral, six pillars were donated by men describing themselves as ‘Yavanas’, foreign converts to Buddhism (top right).

The trade routes across the Red and Arabian seas connected the coasts of India with the Roman world. Among the goods passing in either direction were a carved Indian-ivory figure of a pouting courtesan found preserved in the ashes of Pompeii (right) and Alexandrian cut-glass goblets painted with images of fishing, hunting and gladiatorial contests (second from right). Carvings from Amaravati suggest Ethiopians from Axum and Adulis also arrived to trade and make

diplomatic treaties (left and far left).



The reality of East-West trade in the classical period. The map shows Roman coin hoards: none are found east of the Pamirs or the Oxus. But there is a notable concentration of Roman gold all around the coasts of India and Sri Lanka, as well as at Aden and on the coast of the Red Sea.

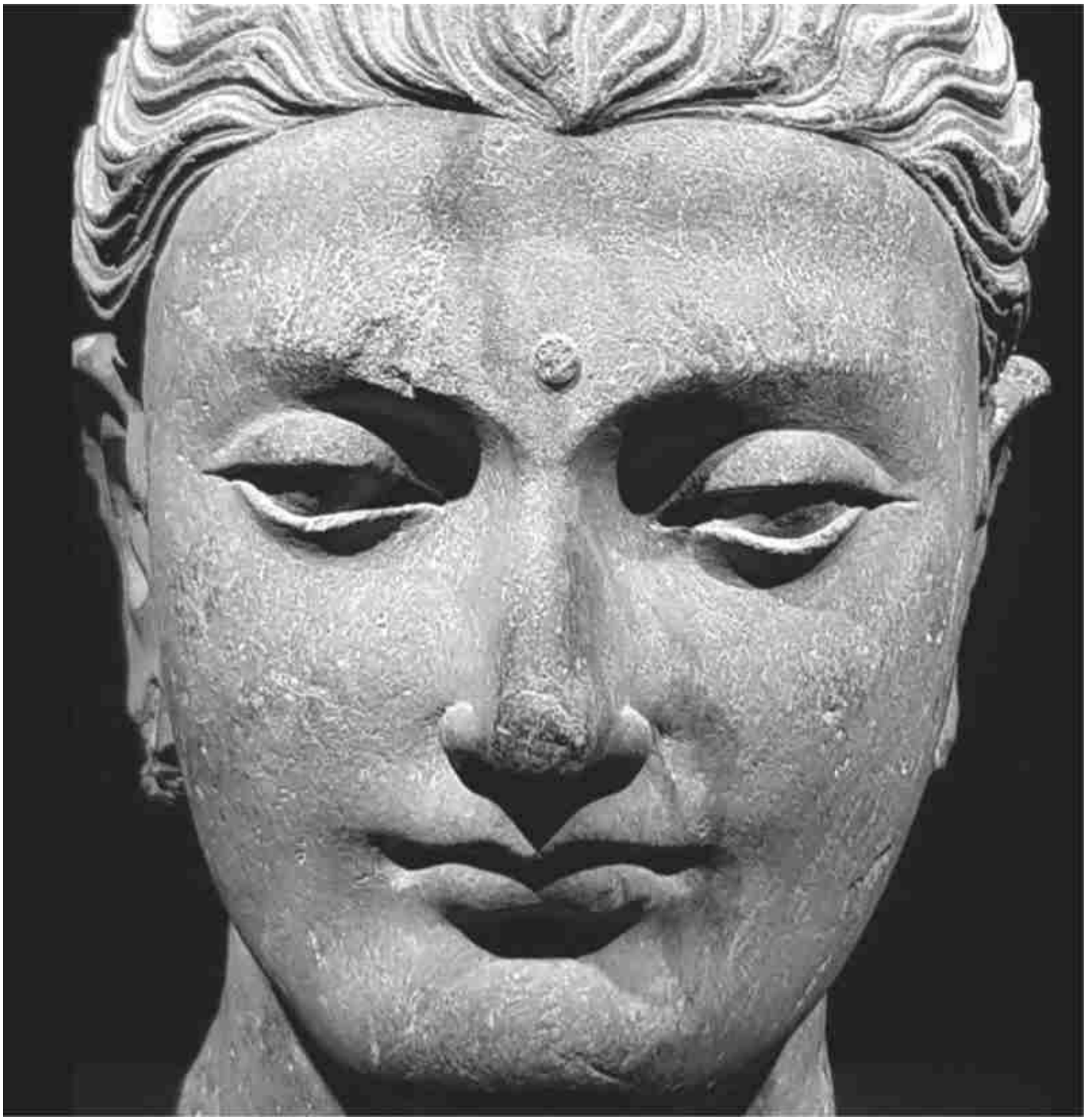
A magnificent Buddha – the first found to the west of Afghanistan – unearthed in 2022 in Berenike on the Red Sea coast of Egypt. It was sculpted from the finest Proconnesian marble in a part Indo-Gandharan, part Romano-Egyptian, part Palmyran fashion. From the style of the carving, the archaeologists who found it believe that the sculpture must have been made in a workshop in second-century CE Alexandria.

A fortune made from the pepper trade may be behind a beautiful fourth-century CE mosaic filling the apse of the luxuriously appointed Roman villa near Piazza Armerina in Sicily. Here an Indian-looking goddess is depicted, apparently copied from an Indian original, flanked by an elephant and a tiger with pepper vines hanging behind her. The mosaic illustrates India's main exports to the Roman world – pepper (growing on vines behind the goddess), ivory,

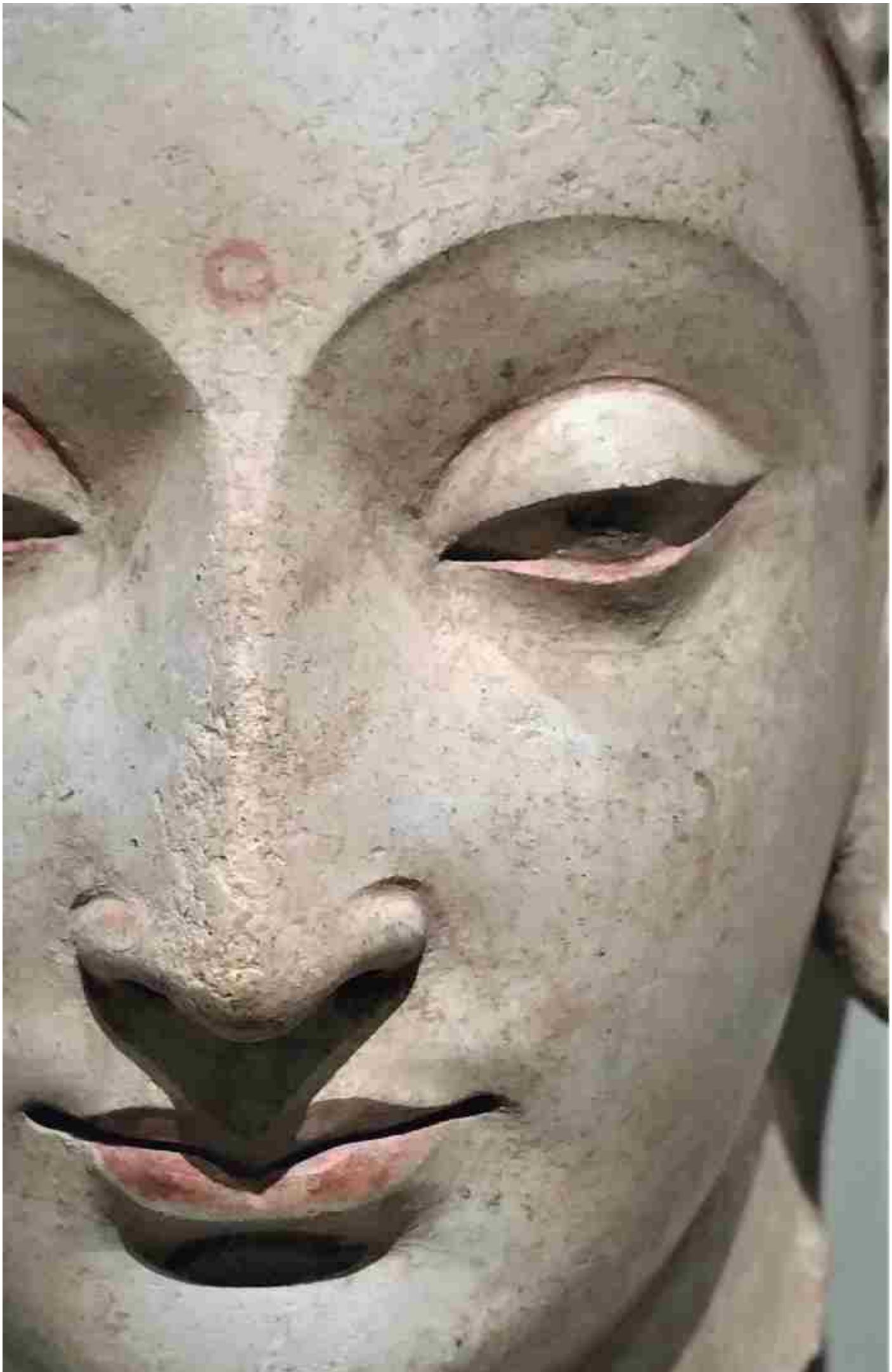
translucent silks and wild beasts for the circus.

The Fasting Buddha, now in the Lahore Museum, c.400 CE. Arguably the greatest, and certainly the most striking, of all Gandharan sculptures.

The monastery at Miran on the southern rim of the Taklamakan desert in Xinjiang was founded in c.400 CE, with walls decorated by a painter who signed himself Tita/Titus, possibly an expatriate Romano-Egyptian. The characteristically huge, luminous eyes of his subjects look very much like the work then being produced in the desert monasteries of Coptic Egypt, and several panels have iconographic parallels with Coptic work, such as this papyrus of Christ and his disciples (below).



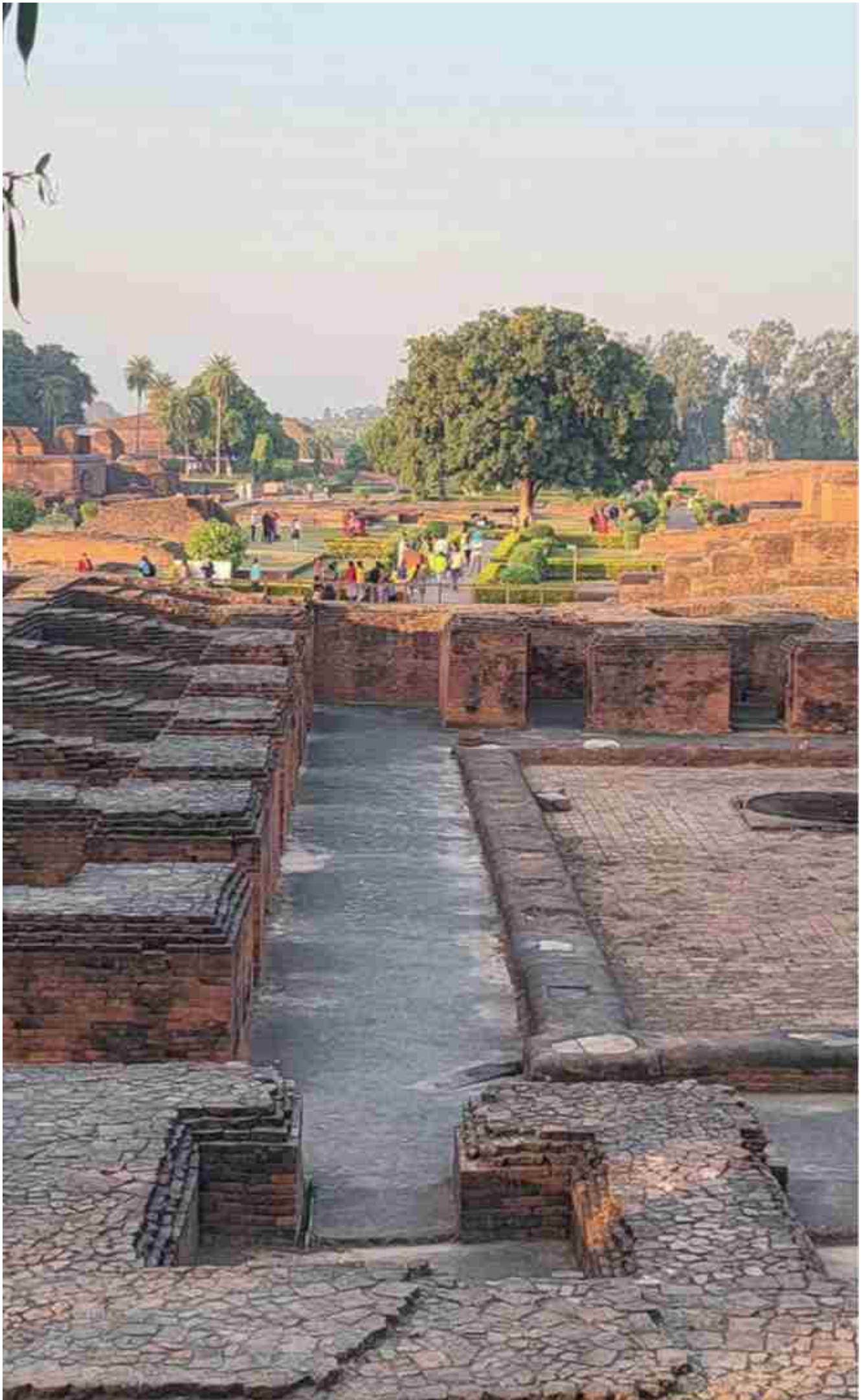
Gandharan art was strongly grounded in the art of early Buddhist India, but also shows the imprint of Roman and particularly Romano-Egyptian style of sculpture in the first and second century CE. These fashions were likely carried into Gandhara through imported luxury goods such as those found at Bagram, but maybe also by itinerant sculptors. The life story of Gautama Buddha as sculpted in Gandhara is often accompanied by Roman imagery such as Corinthian capitals and Dionysian scenes of music, dance and merry-making. The Kushan sculpture of Mathura also shows this Romano-Egyptian influence, as we can see in this sculpture of the boy Rishyashringa (bottom right) – whose story appears in both the Buddhist Jatakas and the *Mahabharata* – which shows the influence of the iconography of the Hellenistic-Egyptian deity, Harpocrates.



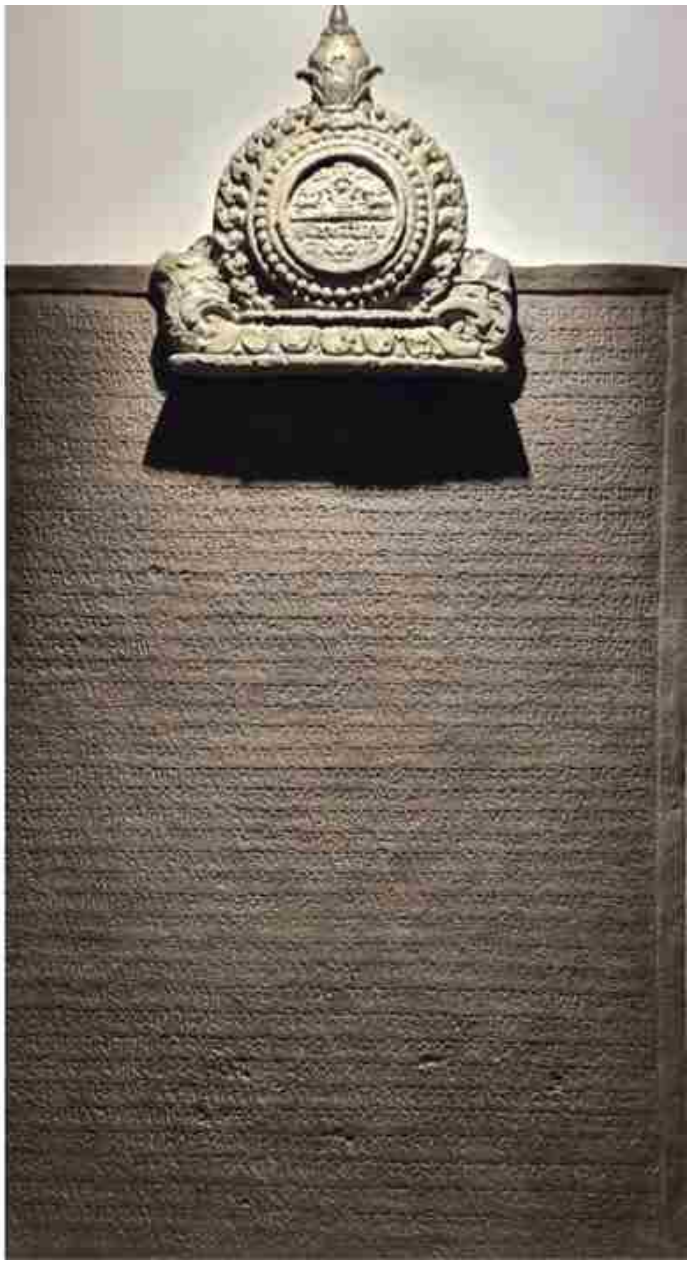
Hadda near Jalalabad is one of the greatest centres of late Gandharan art. The Hadda style, produced mainly in painted and gilded terracotta, but also on gypsum, is one of the most refined elegance and delicacy.

Top: Excavations at Mes Aynak in Logar Province near Kabul have uncovered a great richness of Kushan sculpture. Powered by the proceeds of the copper mine that the monks worked for profit, this Buddhist enclave was a major centre of early Indic trade and culture, from which Indian ideas, religion, art, philosophy and learning spread out across the Hindu Kush. Bottom: The Hellenistic coins of the Bactrian Greeks, such as this of Demetrius I, c.222-180 BCE, were succeeded by those of the Kushans, which show an interest in a variety of Indian deities and religious systems (bottom left). The coins of Kujula Kadphises (r.c.40–90 CE) show some of the earliest images of what looks like Lord Shiva, leaning against his bull Nandi with his trident (bottom one-from-left). On the back of one of the coins of Kanishka (r.c.127–150 CE) is the standing figure of a heavily moustachioed Buddha, with his hand raised in the gesture of fearlessness and protection. Underneath, in a script adapted from Greek, is a legend which reads simply ‘BODDO’ – the first coin anywhere to depict the Buddha (bottom right).

The rock-cut caves of Kizil in Xinjiang, Western China, are filled with fantastical murals of surreal visions. Holy men are depicted like shamans, suspended in the act of levitation, still holding their staffs and bowls. Others can be seen circling the image of the Buddha, who is flying through the air with flames shooting from his shoulders, hips and feet. There are other strange creatures such as blue elephants and flights of white geese circling a crescent moon.



The sixth-century CE monk Xuanzang (previous page) enrolled at the great Indian Buddhist monastery and university of Nalanda in order to study the manuscripts in the largest Buddhist library in the world (left). There he studied the texts of the different schools of Buddhism, as well as the Vedas, Sanskrit grammar, logic, philosophy, medicine, metaphysics, divination, mathematics, astronomy, literature and magic. On arrival at Nalanda, Xuanzang took a tour round the lecture halls, stupas, five temples and the successive courtyards containing the cells which housed the 10,000 monks and scholars gathered there (above).



Top left: Excavators at Nalanda found rare Mahayana iconographies of the different Bodhisattvas; these had inspired subsequent statues and bronzes across Southeast Asia. Top right: One entire monastery college at Nalanda was built and endowed by the passionately Buddhist ‘Lords of the Mountains’, the Sailendra rajas of far-distant Indonesia, as recorded on the Nalanda copper plate of Devapaladeva. Bottom: The foot of a monumental bronze statue of a Bodhisattva found at Nalanda.

Buddhism became the court religion of China through the influence of the remarkable Wu Zetian, the first and only female Emperor of China. Top left and right: The Tang emperors Taizong and Gaizong. Wu Zetian started off as the fifth-ranking concubine of Taizong before becoming first the mistress, then the wife and finally the co-emperor of his son, Gaizong. Bottom left: A Tang figure of a woman rider from the period of Wu Zetian. Bottom right: A portrait of the Empress Wu Zetian in old age from *An 18th-century Album of Portraits of 86 Emperors of China.*

The larger-than-life portrait statue of Mahendravarman Pallava (top left) carved into the rock of the Adi Varaha cave in Mamallapuram is an image of remarkable precision and force. It shows a tall, commanding and broadshouldered man sporting a cap, a *dhoti* and long earrings. His left hand rests on the wrist of his young queen, who stands shyly to one side; a beautiful second queen, with pendant earrings, stands attendant to her left. Other sculptures include images of the Goddess Durga riding into battle against the buffalo demon Mahishasura (bottom left) and being lustrated by elephants (bottom right). Other figures, probably based on the Pallava monarchs and their courts, line the walls of the temples that once abutted the harbour (top right).

Top: A sailing boat carefully sculpted on the walls of Borobodur. Such boats sailed back and forwards on the monsoon winds between India and Southeast Asia. Bottom: In the rainy season, a network of canals in the Mekong Delta flood into a wide, sweet-water lagoon which leaves the higher hills, like the early temple site of Phnom Da, near Angkor Borei, as conical islands in the stream. This lagoon became the terminus for a trade route leading eastwards to India, Persia and the Roman Red Sea ports and westwards towards China in the 1st century CE.

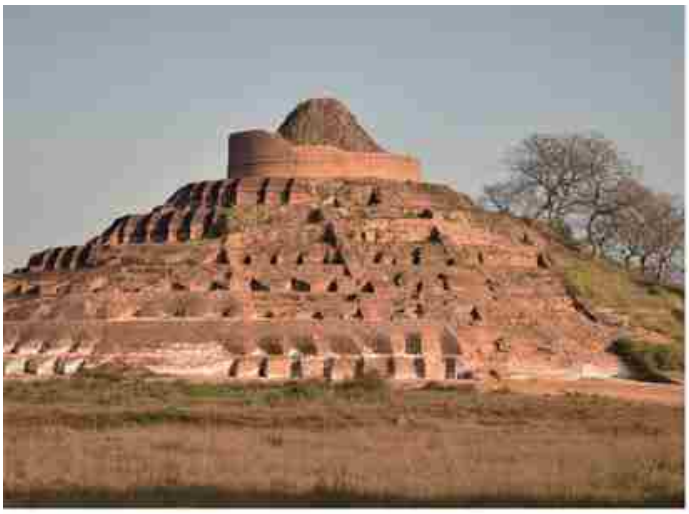
The wooded hill of Phnom Da is home to some of the earliest known shrines of Vishnu in Southeast Asia, including the seventh-century Asram Moha Rosei.

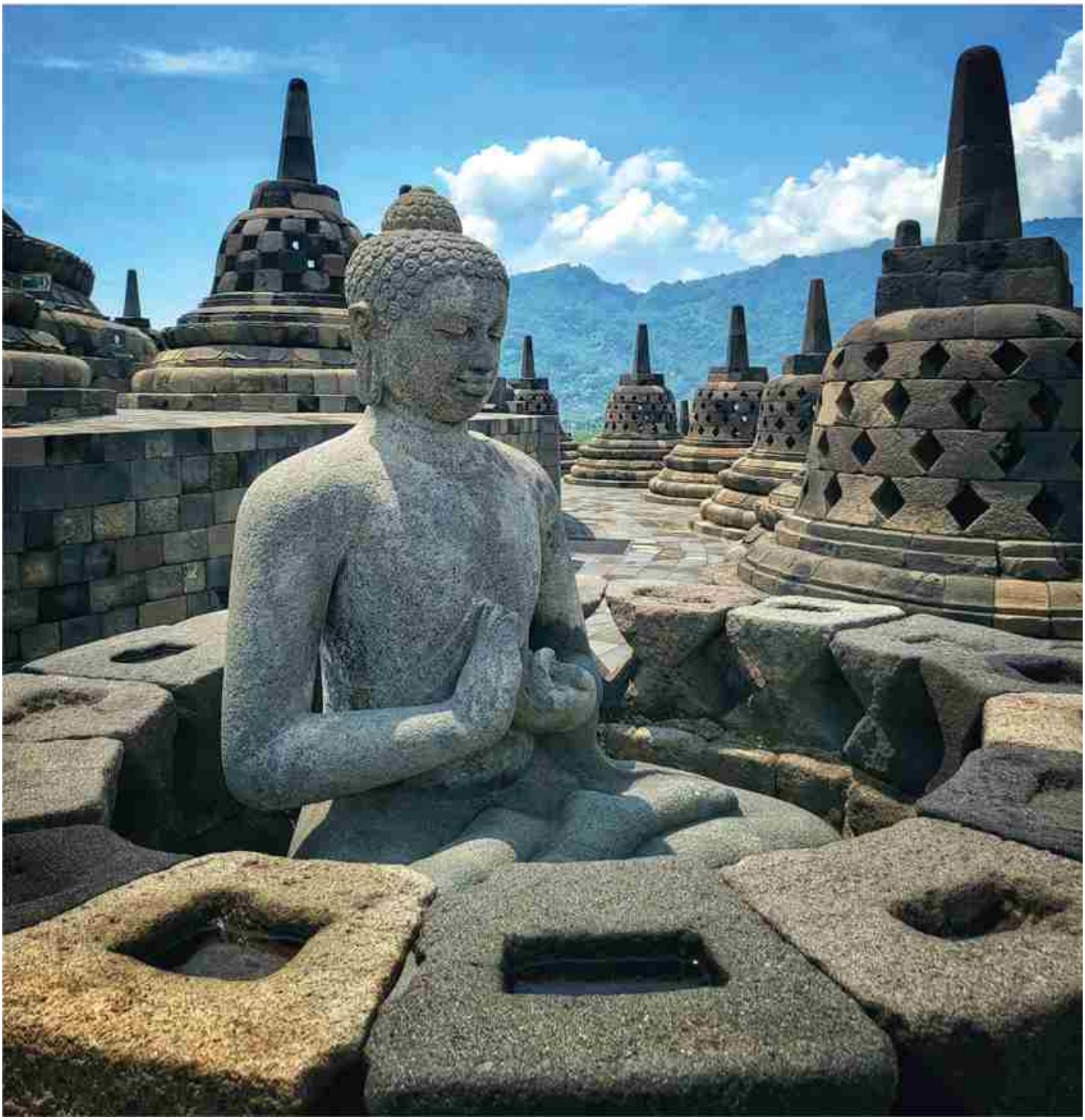
Around the peaks of Phnom Da and Angkor Borei were several superb statues of the different incarnations of Vishnu. The greatest – now one of the masterworks of the National Museum in Phnom Penh – shows an eight-armed Lord Vishnu, bare-chested and tight-bodied, standing regally in a Khmer sarong, his hands bristling with symbols of his power and weapons of war: fire, a sceptre, an antelope skin, a club, a broken pedestal, a clump of grass, a thunderbolt and an ewer containing the nectar of immortality.

Top left: This statue of the Hindu goddess Durga from Tuol Kamnap in Cambodia dates from around the 7th to 8th century and was probably modelled on an early Khmer queen. Top right: A series of single-cell brick sanctuary temples on Phnom Kulen built during the reign of King Jayavaraman II are associated with a series of beautiful sculptures, including this Vishnu which is believed to be modelled on Jayavarman's own features. Bottom: A royal consecration carved on an early Khmer lintel from Kampong Thom in central Cambodia. Here the king sits in an open pavilion with long lines of bearded Brahmins stretching out on either side of him.

The earliest extant temples in Java, such as this at Gedong Songo (bottom), are built in a style strikingly similar to the Shore Temple at the Pallava port of Mamallapuram. But they are not copies. Though many Pallava ideas and designs reappear far from home, several features, such as the tall and elegantly elongated doorways, are unique to Java. Most of the upper storeys of these temples have upturned corner accents, presumably typical of wooden Javanese prototypes

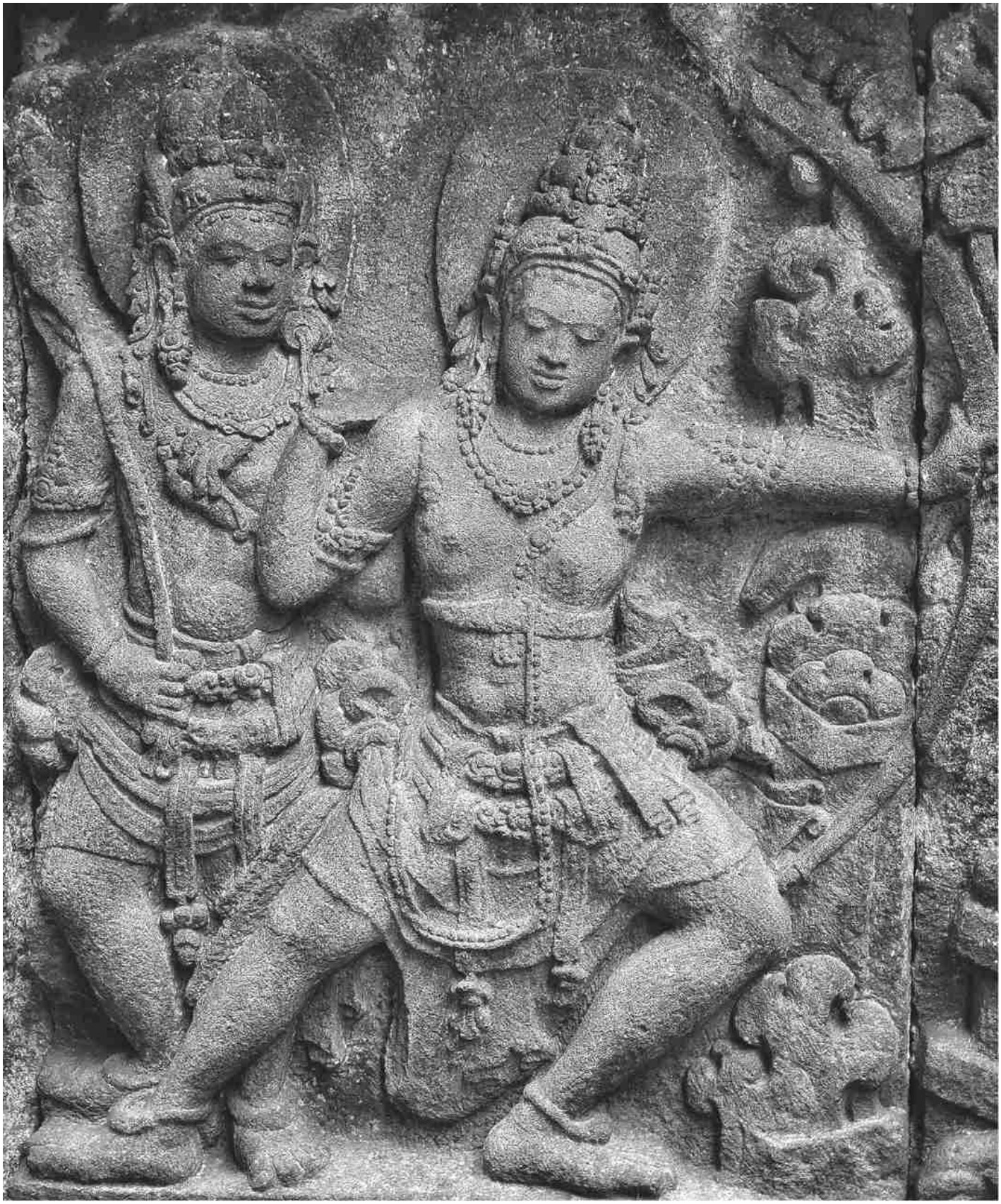
and resembling Chinese flying eaves.



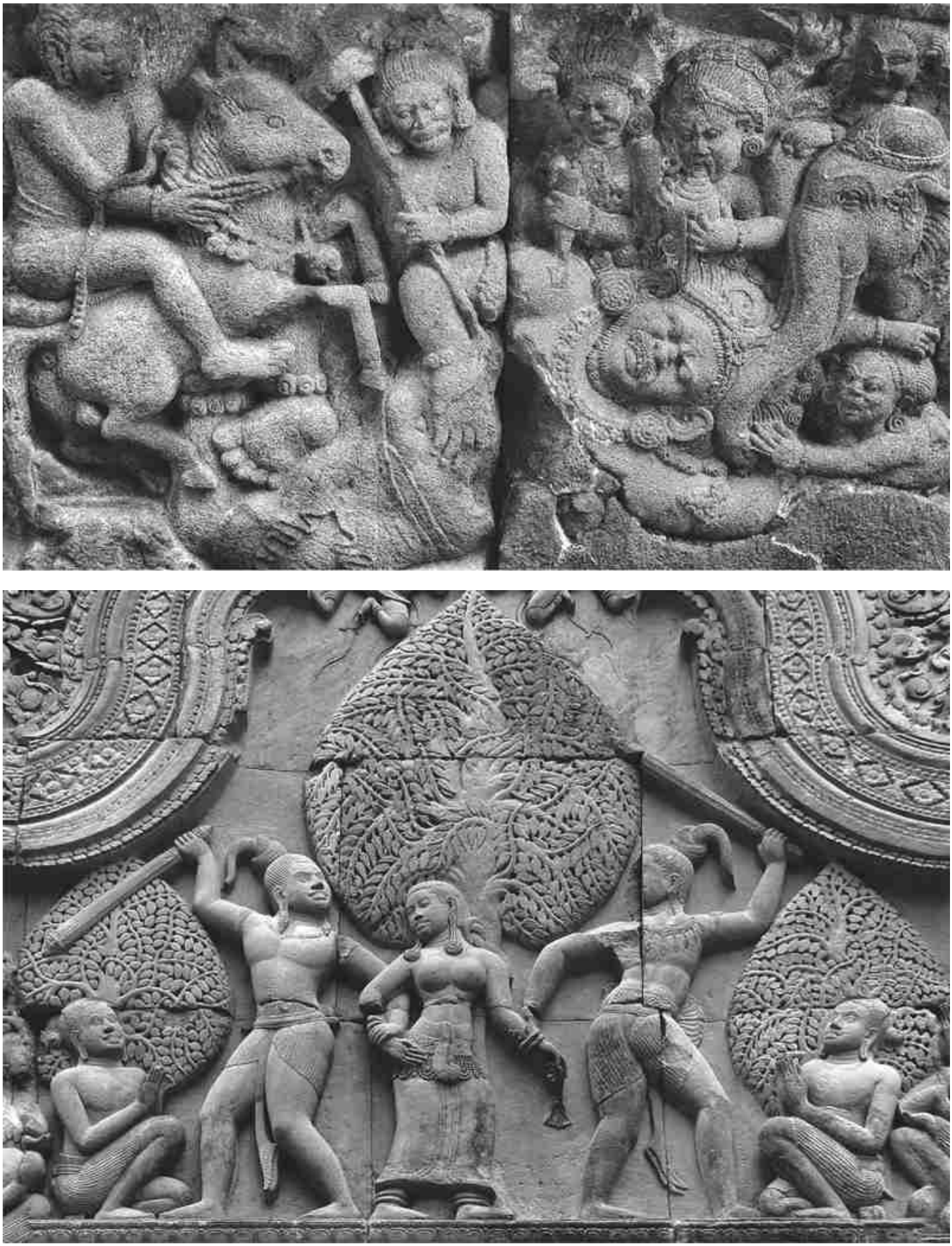


Borobodur (top right and bottom) is arguably the greatest and most philosophically complex Buddhist structure in the

world. Begun around 760 CE and completed about seventy years later in 830 CE, Borobudur is a *mandala*-shaped step pyramid on a massive scale, showcasing a number of complex and highly esoteric Buddhist concepts. Within its galleries are successive tiers of superbly sculpted Buddhist scripture. It is the culmination of an Indian Buddhist tradition of building monumental stupas set in vast stone mandalas, such as that at Kesariya in Bihar (top left).

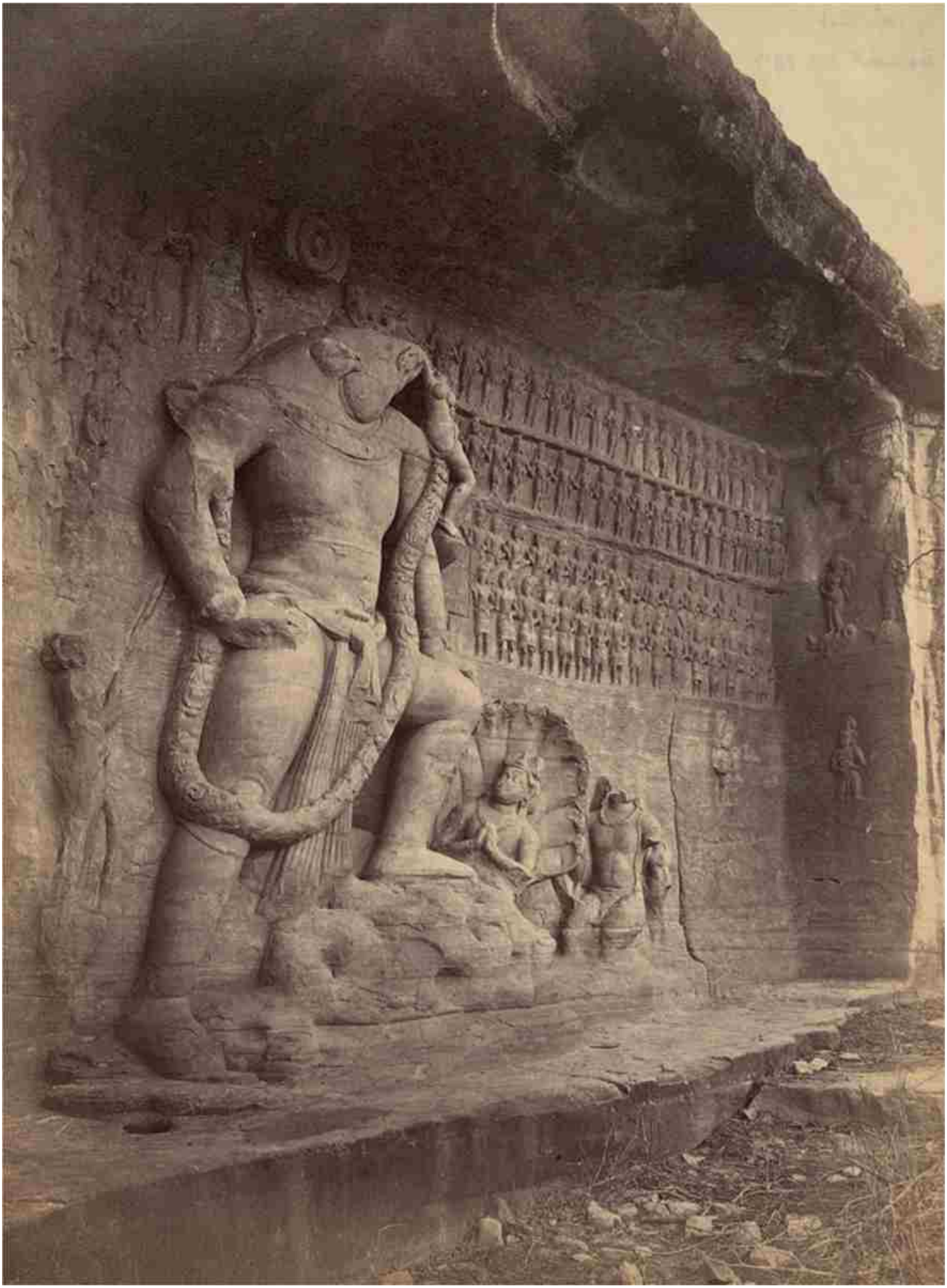


No Indian export had a deeper or more long-lasting impact than the epics of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. The ninth-century temple of Loro Jonggrang at Prambanan contains some of the earliest and arguably the greatest sets of reliefs inspired by the *Ramayana* ever sculpted, including such familiar and beloved scenes as Rama shooting the Golden Deer (top) and the demons trying to wake Kumbhakarna, the mountain-sized brother of Ravanna (bottom).



The temple of Banteay Srei near Angkor Wat depicts many scenes from Indian literature. The sculpture (top) represents the fight between the demons Sunda and Upasunda over possession of the *apsara* Tilottama from the *Mahabharata*, whereas the carved scene (bottom) is from the *Ramayana* and depicts the many-armed Ravana desperately shaking Mount Kailasha to attract the attention of Lord Shiva, who, hardly bothered, steadies it with a touch of his foot.

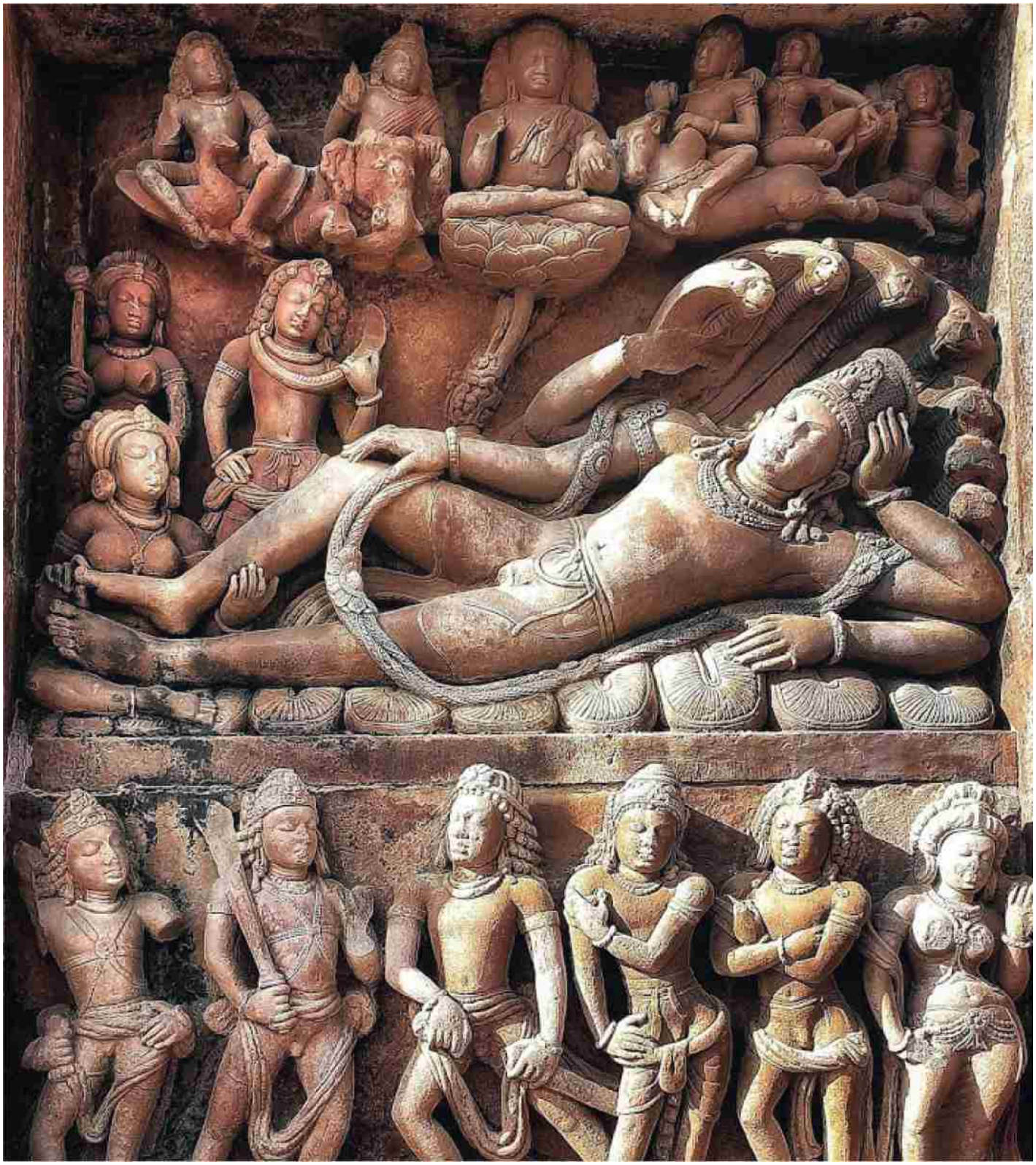
The mighty quincunx of towers at Angkor Wat is the centre of a complex so vast it can be seen from space. The moat took 5,000 men ten years of digging, and encloses an area four times the size of Vatican City. The temple, constructed of more stone than the largest Egyptian pyramid, is not only the largest and most magnificent Hindu temple in the world, but arguably the largest and most spectacular religious structure anywhere.

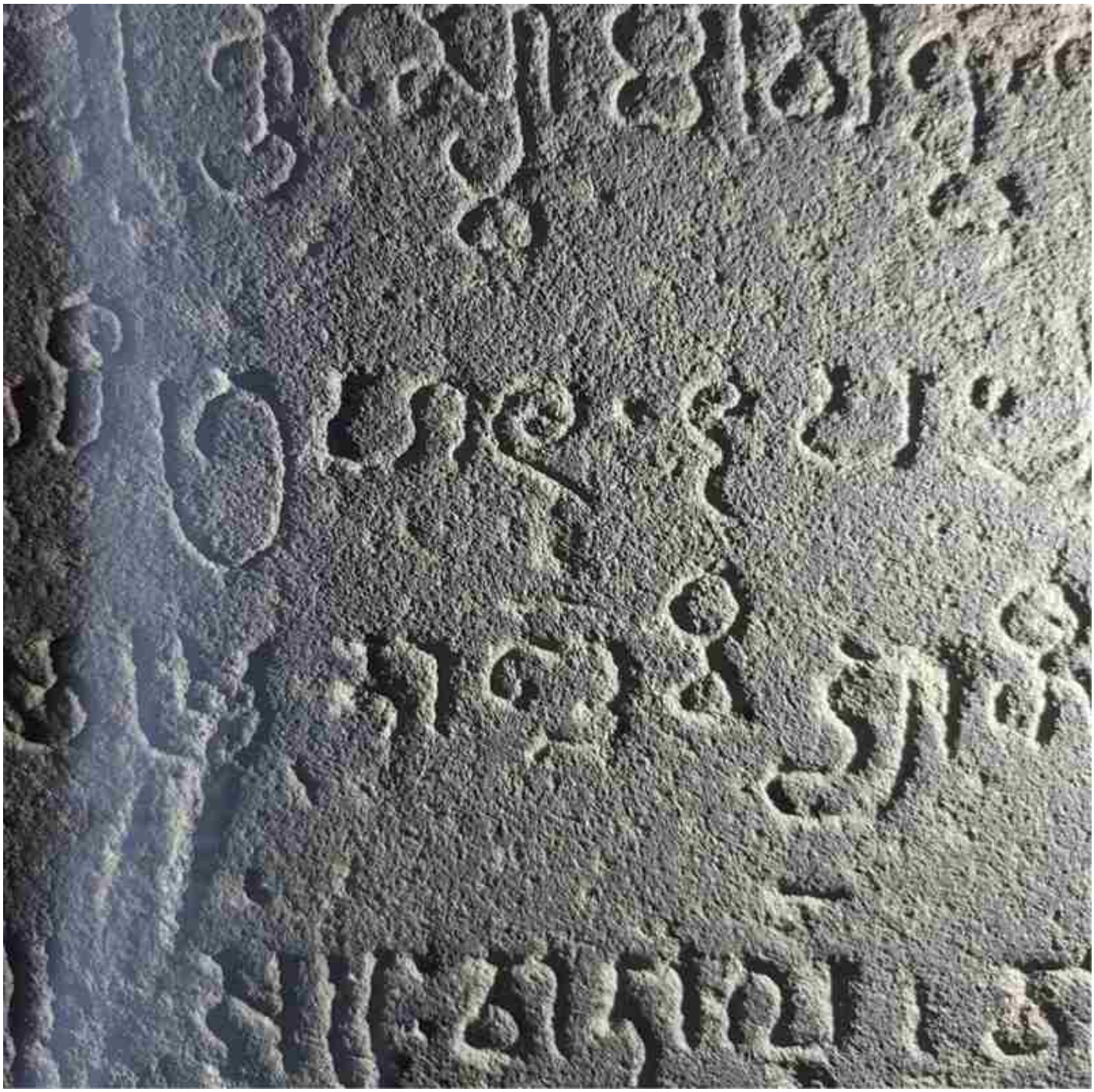


In around 400 CE, Chandragupta II celebrated his victory over invaders by decorating his observatory at the 'Mountain of the Sunrise' with sculptures of the different incarnations of his Lord Vishnu. The most remarkable is the larger-thanlife- size god-boar, Varaha, who stands at once glorious and assertive in front of a prostrate *naga* and the now-headless Chandragupta.

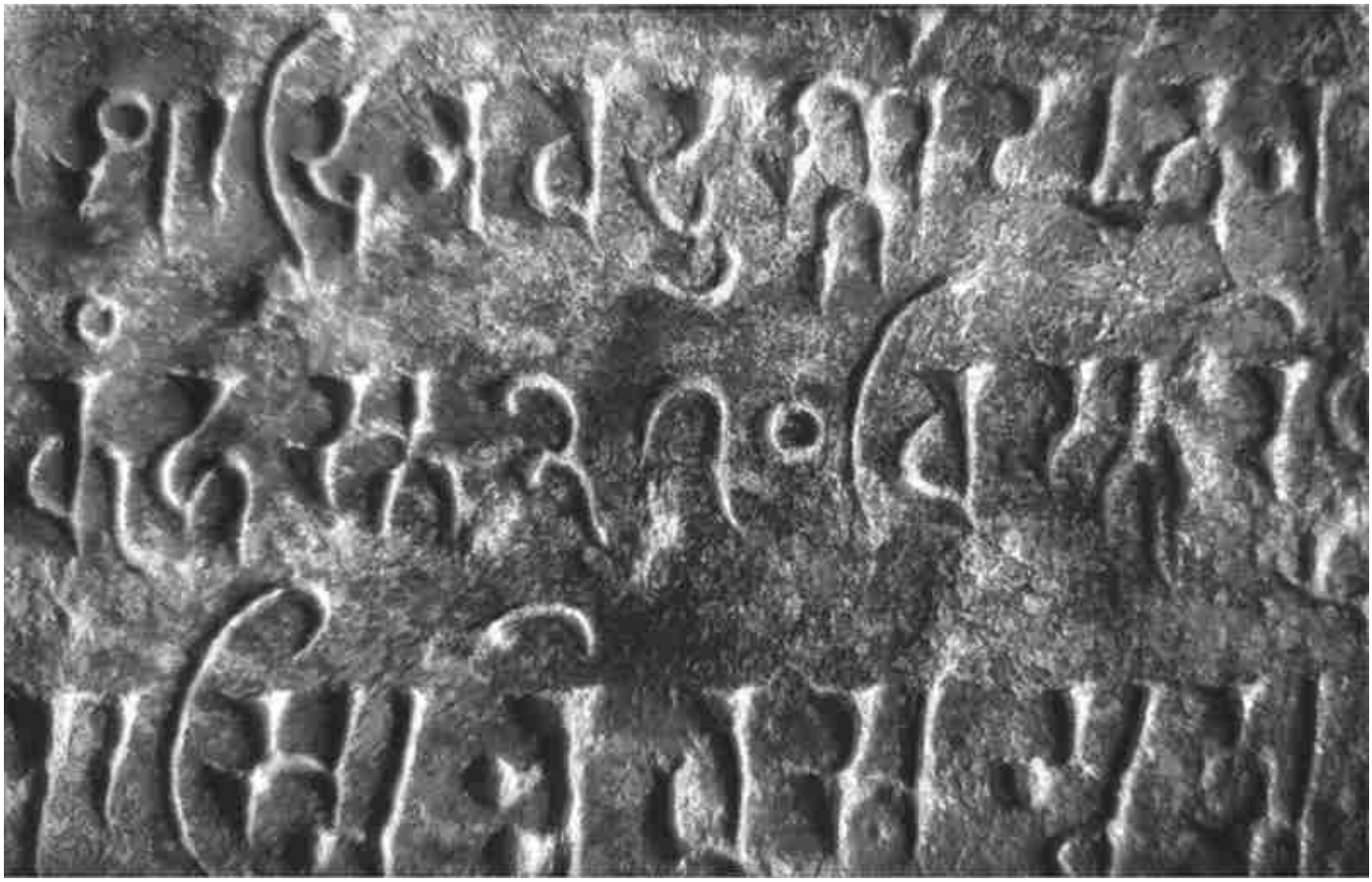
The beautiful gold coins of Chandragupta II (r.380 – c.415 CE) depict him both as a conqueror riding a horse and seated on a stool, contemplating a flower. On the rear is the king with the Garuda Standard, the symbol of his preferred incarnation of Vishnu, with the other showing the Goddess Lakshmi.

The spectacular imperial Gupta sculptures at the Dasavatara Visnu Mandir in Deogarh (c.500 CE) contain some of the earliest surviving representation of the ten avatars of Vishnu. These include spectacular friezes of Vishnu on Garuda coming down to earth to rescue the elephant Gajendra (top) and sleeping on his serpent Shesha (bottom).



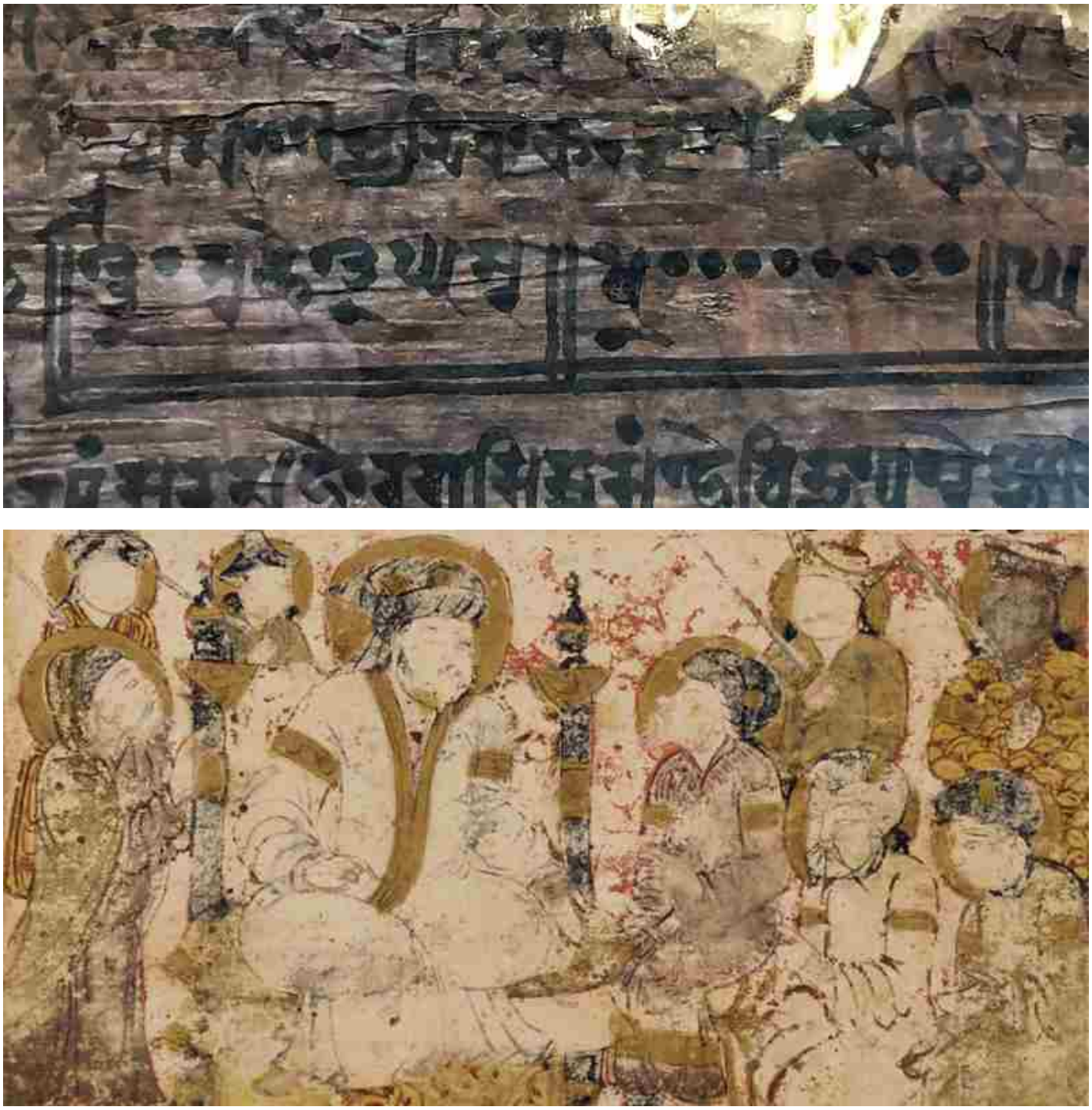


The celebrated stele K127 (top), found at Sambor Prei Kuk in Cambodia, is generally acknowledged to have the oldest dated zero in the world, 683 CE: it is the dot between the two tadpoles in the middle of the second line.



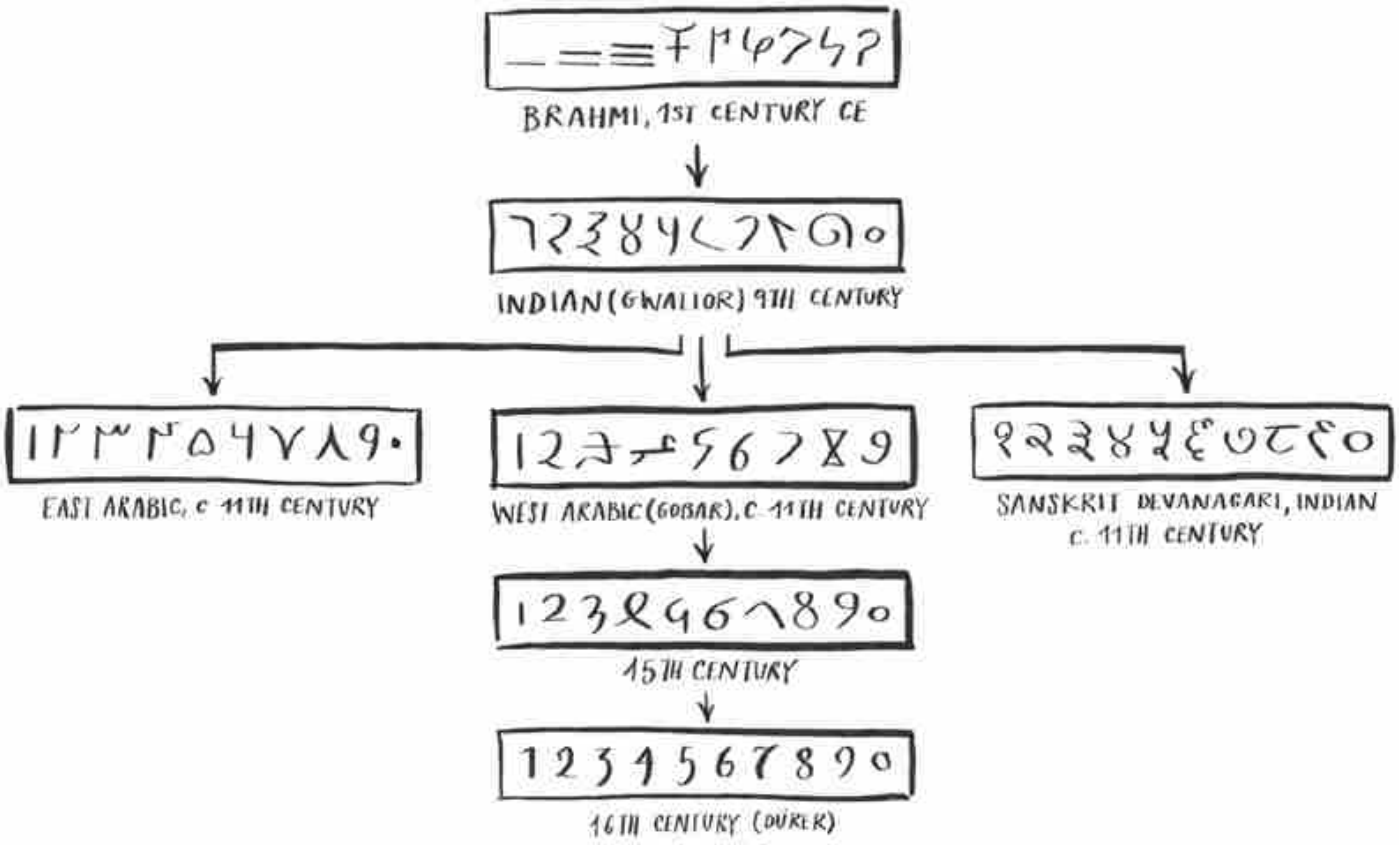
Two hundred years later in Gwalior, we see for the first time a hole appears within the dot to give the 0 symbol we still use today (bottom).

The Bakhshali Manuscript is, by many centuries, the oldest surviving Indic mathematical text and the oldest extant manuscript in the world to use zero and decimal place values. It is currently thought to have been written around 700 CE. Here the zeros are small black dots. Its author Chajaka was concerned with practical tasks like weighing metal and working out losses in raw materials through smelting. He seems to have been in the metal trade and living near the major Gandharan monastery of Takht-i-Bahi, where it is quite possible he was making metal statues for the monks.



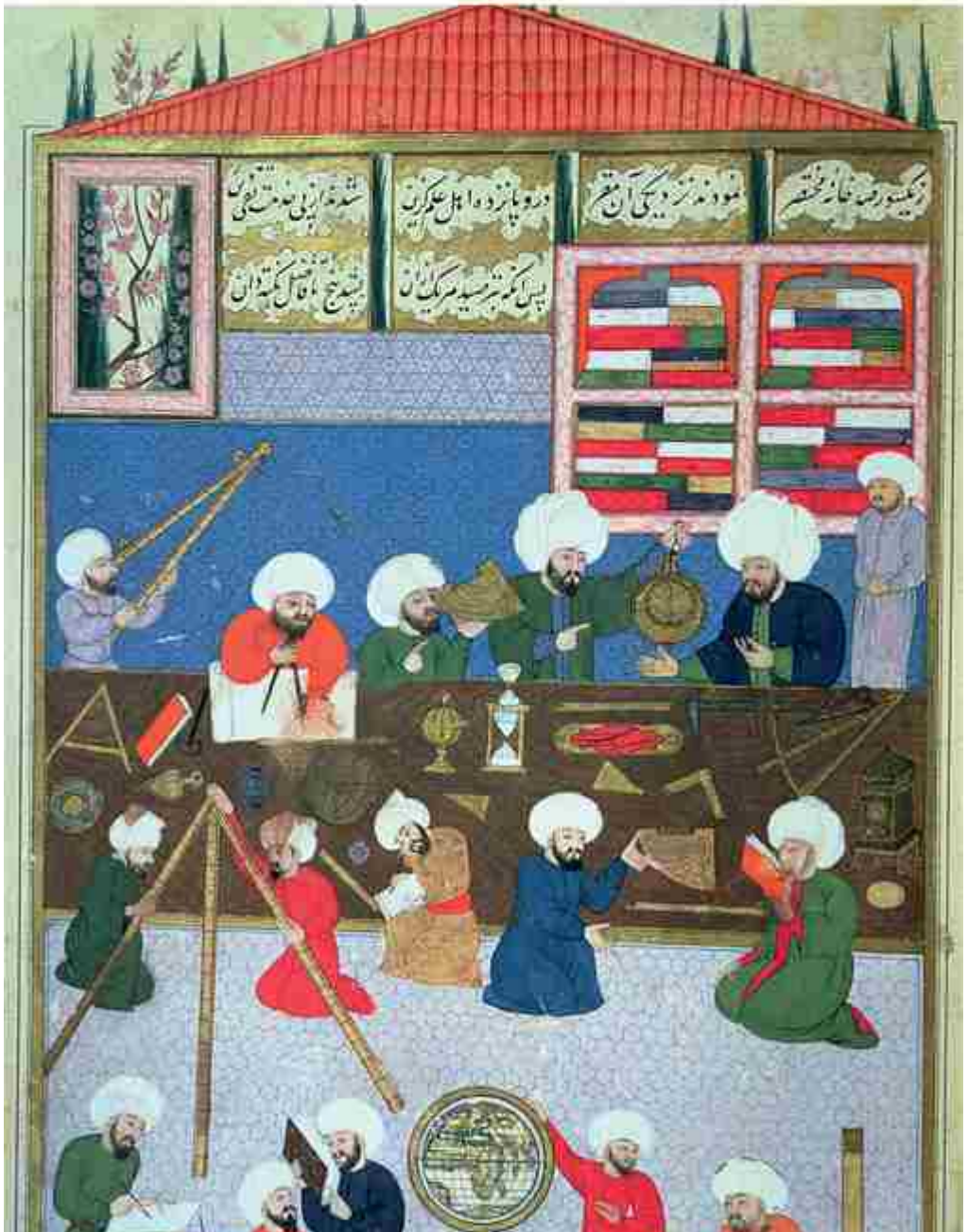
Khalid ibn Barmak kneels to the right of Caliph al-Saffah during his proclamation as ruler in Kufa, from Balami's *Tarikhnama*, the earliest known extant prose book in the Persian language.

The last of the Barmakids, Ja'far, was the inseparable best friend of Harun al-Rashid. The *Arabian Nights* is full of stories of the nocturnal adventures of the pair, and Ja'far is still very much the snappy dresser in his cartoon avatar in the Disney film *Aladdin*.

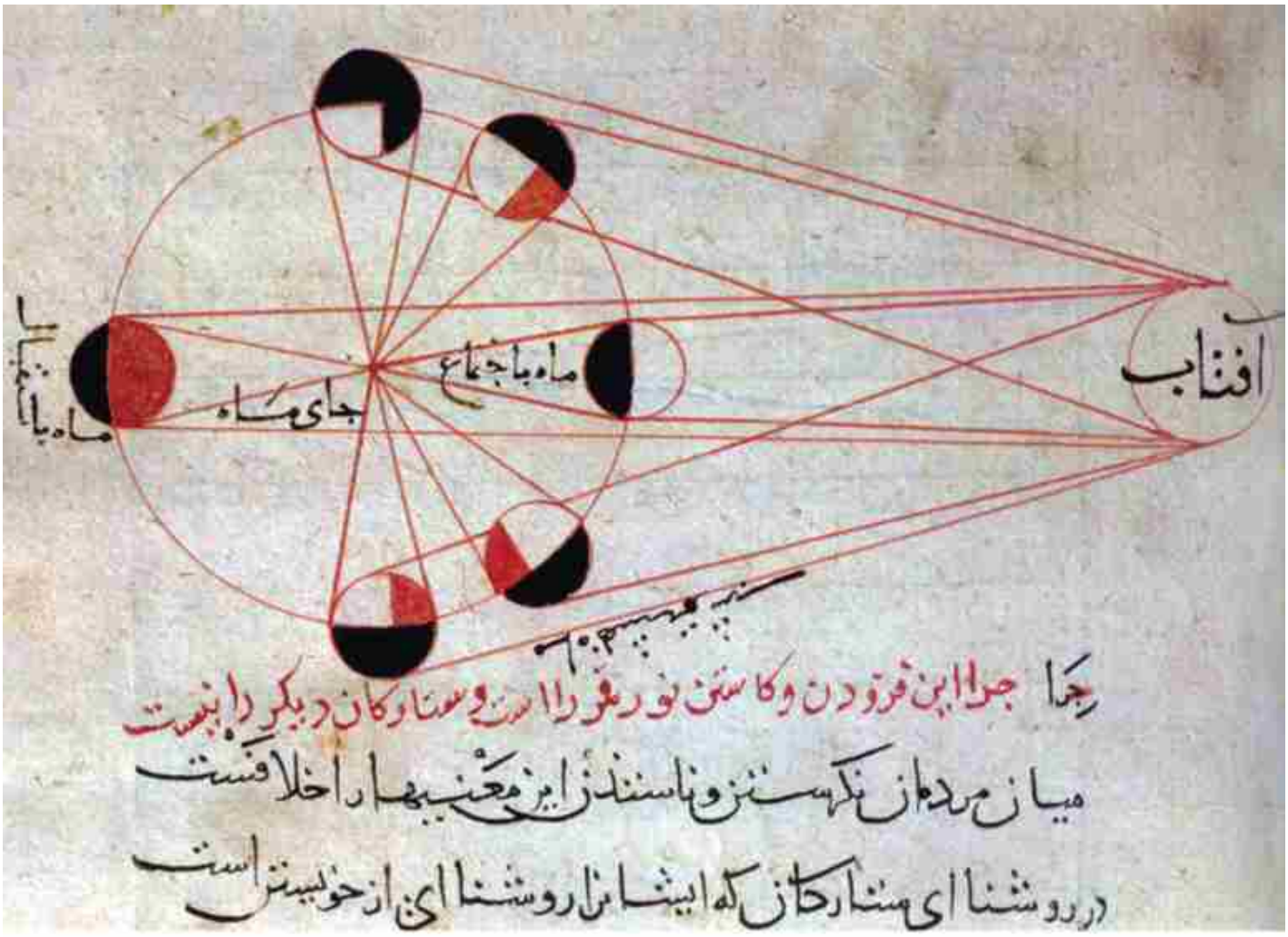


This diagram represents the evolution of our numbers from Ashoka's India to modern Europe.

Khwarizmi's *The Compendious Book of Calculating by Completion and Balancing, According to Hindu Calculation* was a landmark in the history of mathematics, read across the Islamic world and later translated into Latin.



Khwarizmi combined Euclid's theories with Indian mathematics. The clarity of his writing, and the simple way he managed to explain complex ideas, inspired generations of mathematicians and initiated rapid developments in algebra, geometry, trigonometry and astronomy across the Islamic world. Indian innovations such as linear and quadratic equations, geometrical solutions, tables of sines, tangents and co-tangents suddenly became accessible to all. Most importantly, he taught to the Arabs the importance of the Indian concept of zero.


آفتاب
ماه باجتماع
جای ماه
ماه باستقبال
جرا جرا این فزودن و کاستن نور قمر را است و ستارگان دیگر را نیست
میان مردمان نگرستن و ناستدن این معنیها را خلافست
در روشنا ای ستارگان که ایشان را روشنا ای از خویشتن است

والاجتماع بأهل الرياضات واصحاب الجدل منصف من نفسه اذا خصم معترف
بمواضع الاصابة والخطا معتدل في الملابس والمآكل والمشارب والمناكح و
الحركات بيده آلة النجوم والصناعات ومات وله ثمان وثمنون سنة

geminat, et sic sunt in secundo mense paria 3; ex quibus in uno mense duo pregnantur; et geminantur in tercio mense paria 2 coniculorum; et sic sunt paria 5 in ipso mense; ex quibus in ipso pregnantur paria 3; et sunt in quarto mense paria 8; ex quibus paria 5 geminant alia paria 5; quibus additis cum pariis 8, faciunt paria 13 in quinto mense; ex quibus paria 5, que geminata fuerunt in ipso mense, non concipiunt in ipso mense, sed alia 8 paria pregnantur; et sic sunt in sexto mense paria 21; cum quibus additis pariis 13, que geminantur in septimo, erunt in ipso paria 34; cum quibus additis pariis 21, que geminantur in octavo mense, erunt in ipso paria 55; cum quibus additis pariis 34, que geminantur in nono mense, erunt in ipso paria 89; cum quibus additis rursum pariis 55, que geminantur in decimo, erunt in ipso paria 144; cum quibus additis rursum pariis 89, que geminantur in undecimo mense, erunt in ipso paria 233. Cum quibus etiam additis pariis 144, que geminantur in ultimo mense, erunt paria 377; et tot paria peperit sicut par in prefato loco in capite unius anni. Potes enim videre in hac margine, qualiter hoc operati fuimus, scilicet quod iunximus primum numerum cum secundo, videlicet 1 cum 2; et secundum cum tercio; et tercium cum quarto; et quartum cum quinto, et sic deinceps, donec iunximus decimum cum undecimo, videlicet 144 cum 233; et habuimus suprascriptorum cuniculorum summam, videlicet 377; et sic posses facere per ordinem de infinitis numeris mensibus.

Quatuor homines sunt, quorum primus, secundus et tercius habent denarios 27; secundus vero et tercius et quartus habent denarios 31; tercius et quartus et primus habent denarios 34; quartus et primus et secundus habent denarios 37. Queritur quot unusquisque habet. Adde hos .iiii. numeros in unum, erunt 129; qui numerus est triplum totius summe denariorum illorum .iiii. hominum. Ideo quia in ipsa summa unusquisque eorum triplicatus est; quare diviso ipso per 3 reddet 43 pro eorum summa. Ex qua si extraxeris denarios primi et secundi et tercii hominis, scilicet 27, remanebit quarto homini denarii 16. Item si extraxeris denarios 31, extraxeris denarios secundi et tercii et quarti hominis, remanebit primo homini denarii 12. Rursum si de denariis 43 extraxeris 34, scilicet denarios tercii et quarti hominis et primi hominis, remanebit secundo denarii 9. Et adhuc si de denariis 43 extraxeris denarios 37 quarti et primi et secundi hominis, remanebit tercio denarii 6. Convenientur itaque denarii 12 primi hominis cum 9 secundi et cum 6 tercii et cum 16 quarti, nimirum summa reddet 43.

Item si propositum fuit quod inter primum et secundum hominem habent denarios 27, et inter secundum et tercium habent denarios 31, et inter tercium et quartum 34, et inter quartum et primum 37; consimiles huius positionis quedam solvi possunt, quedam non. Unde ut ipse que solvi possunt ab hiis qui solvi non possunt cognoscantur, talem tradimus eis doctrinam, videlicet ut addas numerum primi et secundi cum numero tercii et quarti; et si eorum summa equalis fuerit numero secundi et tercii et quarti et primi, tunc solubilis erit questio; si autem inequalis fuerit, tunc eam non posse solvi cognoscas, ut in hac questione in qua primi et secundi habent 27 et tercii et quarti habent 34, ergo inter omnes .iiii. habent denarios 61. Nam secundi et tercii

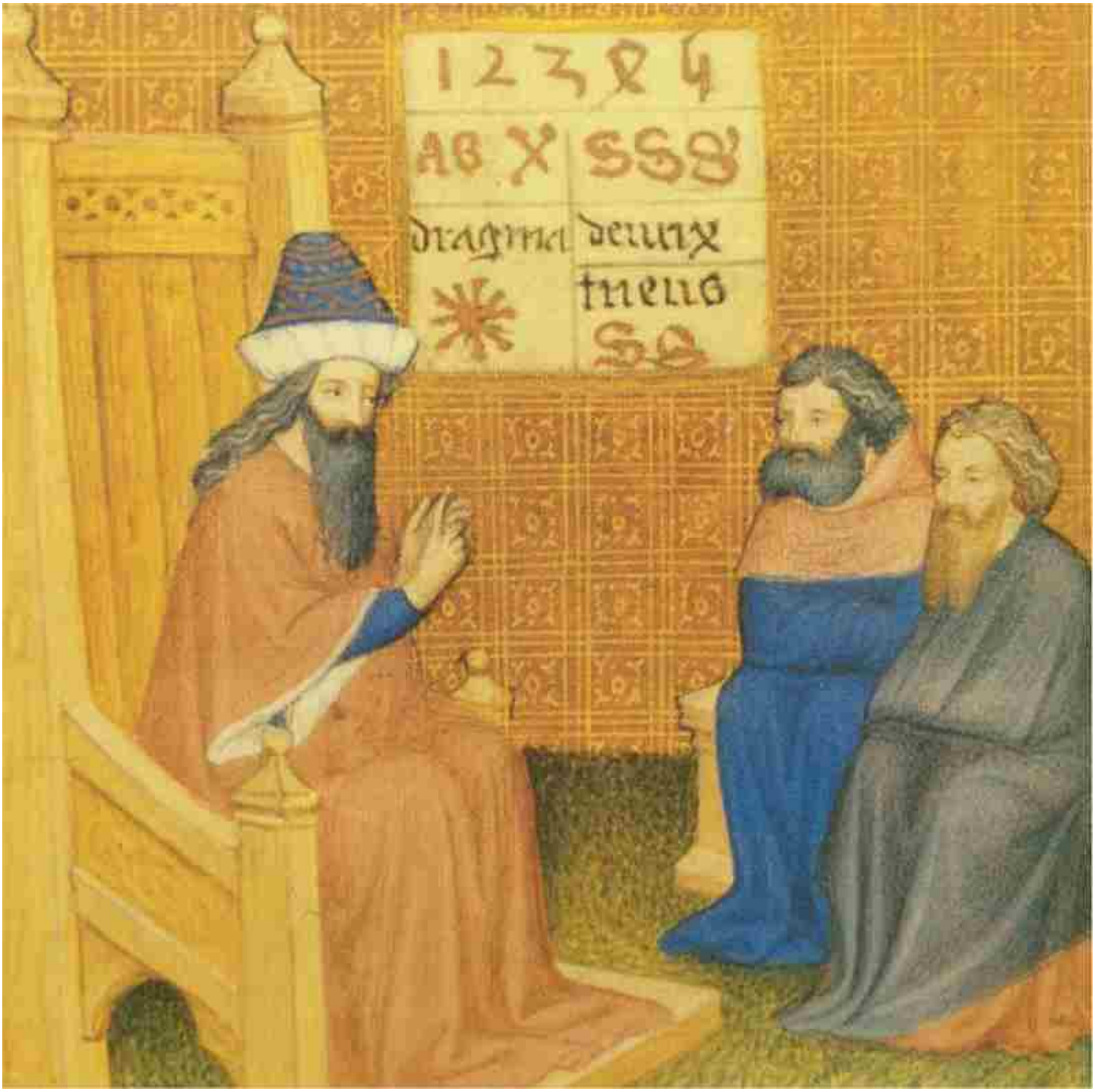
Parium
1
Primus
2
Secundus
3
Tercius
5
Quartus
8
Quintus
13
Sextus
21
Septimus
34
Octavus
55
Nonus
89
Decimus
144
Undecimus
233
Duodecimus
377

Fibonacci wrote the *Liber Abaci*, or the 'Book of the Abacus', also known as the 'Book of Calculation'. The book provided the first detailed Latin account of the *modus Indorum*, the method of the Indians, which Fibonacci believed was superior to any other. It subsequently made Indian numbers and ideas of mathematics well known across Europe.

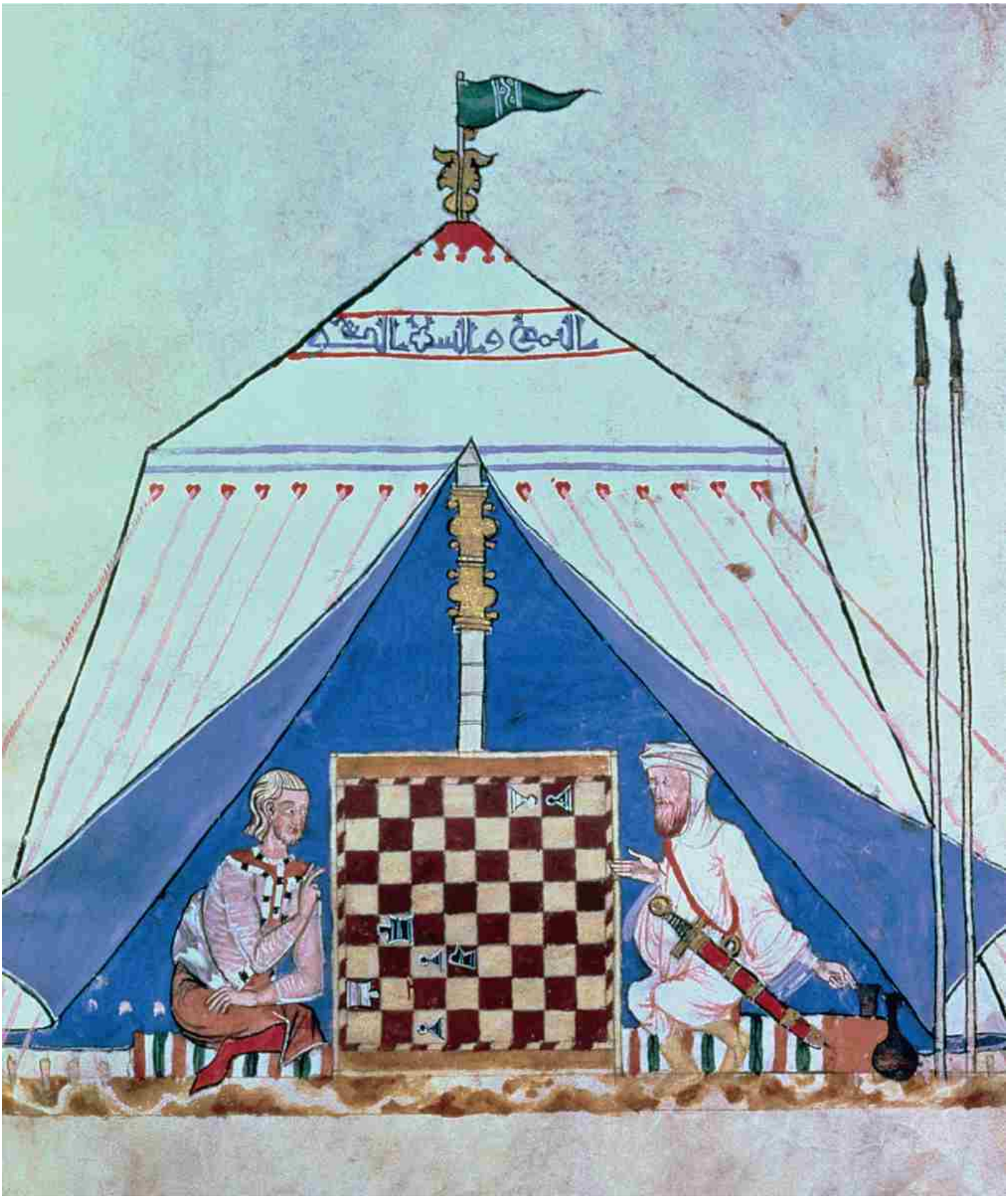
By the twelfth century, Indo-Arabic numerals had been known in Europe for a century, but their use was still restricted to a few scholars. The man who changed this was Leonardo of Pisa (c.1175–1250), known by his nickname 'Fibonacci'.

In 1225 Fibonacci's work came to the attention of the new Holy Roman Emperor and King of Jerusalem and Sicily, Emperor Frederick II (1194–1250). Frederick summoned him to his court and there he was persuaded to rewrite his *Liber Abaci* so as to explain his ideas in a practical fashion that could be used to benefit Italian merchants.

Frederick's obsession with geometry determined the plan of his favourite hunting lodge, the octagonal Castel del Monte.



Adelard of Bath (c.1080–1142), sometimes called the First English Scientist, brought Indian numbers and astronomy to England.



The Indian game of chess and Indian mathematics first took real root in Europe in the Spanish town of Toledo, in what was, by the tenth century, probably the most advanced centre of learning on the continent.

Many of Toledo's Moorish buildings survive, including the mosque once known as the Mezquita Bāb al-Mardūm, after the city gate it stood beside, and the beautiful Ibn Shoshan synagogue.

In Europe, the increasingly widespread use of Indo-Arabic numerals assisted the growth of banking and accounting, initially in Italy under dynasties such as the Medici, shown here in the guise of the Magi in the celebrated masterpiece by Benozzo Gozzoli.

It was European commercial prowess as much as military might that gave Europe the edge over Mughal India. From the mid-eighteenth century, a European corporation – the East India Company – subjugated a divided India to what was probably the supreme act of corporate violence in history.

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